Lost and Found

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/62401453.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationships:	Harry Potter/Tom Riddle, Sirius Black & Harry Potter, Draco Malfoy & Harry Potter
Characters:	Harry Potter, Tom Riddle, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, Draco Malfoy, Theodore Nott, James Potter, Lily Evans Potter, Sirius Black, Original House-Elf Character(s), Kreacher (Harry Potter)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe, Evil James Potter, Evil Lily Evans Potter, Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified, Suicide Attempt, Blood and Violence, Depressed Harry Potter, Arranged Marriage, Out of Character Harry Potter, Unhealthy Relationships, Body Horror, Attempted Rape/Non-Con, Sexual Assault, Past Drug Use, Implied/Referenced Drug Addiction, Drugs, Explicit Sexual Content, Past Rape/Non-con, Past Theodore Nott/Harry Potter, Past Child Abuse, Tags May Change, Additional Warnings In Author's Note, Good Tom Riddle, Tom Riddle is Not Voldemort, Not Britpicked, Not Beta Read, Isekai and Transmigration, Eventual Smut, Bottom Harry Potter, Slow To Update, Harry Potter Whump, Minor Hermione Granger/Ron Weasley, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Implied/Referenced Incest, Harry Potter Has PTSD, Good Sirius Black
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2025-01-21 Updated: 2025-11-30 Words: 123,948 Chapters: 21/26

Lost and Found

by batondecannelle

Summary

“Let me go,” Harry finally murmurs in a quiet breath.

“No,” Riddle sneers. “When I ask my husband a question, I expect a prompt response."

Husband?

-

When Harry meets with Dumbledore at King's Cross and is given the option to take a train onward, to leave everything behind to see his parents again, to be at peace, he doesn't hesitate. He is ready to move on from this life.

But when he instead wakes to an alternate reality where he's married to the Minister of Magic, who just so happens to be a young, sane Tom Riddle, and his parents are alive but not quite the sort of parents he expected them to be, Harry wonders if he made a terrible mistake.

Notes

Please check out Aphelion if you haven't yet, it is amazing! I just couldn't stop thinking about the idea of Harry getting sent to an alternate universe where he's married to Tom haha. This is my take on it!

Also -- read the tags carefully and keep in mind this fic takes place in an alternate reality with a very OOC Harry! I understand that my characterization or plot choices will not be everyone's cup of tea. This is additionally a very angsty story with strong themes of abuse, sexual assault and rape/non-con so tread carefully! As this is a work in progress I also may occasionally add new tags, because I do not always know where the plot will take me until I

get there lol. (I typically will also post chapter-specific TWs in the endnotes of each chapter that go into more specific detail.)

Please refrain from including graphic/triggering content in your comments, as they will likely be deleted. On that note, I love and appreciate any form of positive feedback, and I'm always happy to chat on tumblr :)

See the end of the work for more notes

- Inspired by Aphelion by TimaeusKosmou

Chapter 1: 1

Chapter Notes

minor edits 1/7

Harry is jolted violently out of slumber by the angry slam of a door and thundering footsteps. He shoots up into a half-seated position, his eyes swimming with sleep, and an odd lingering ache in his forehead.

He's in an unfamiliar room, on a king-sized bed covered in white sheets and blankets, clad in muggle clothing and his hair hanging long and curly over his eyes. There's a whisper of a dream lingering in Harry's mind—something cold and sharp, the echoes of laughter, a heavy feeling of resignation, acceptance and a bright, blinding light.

-

"What the fuck were you thinking?"

Harry blinks, looks up, and in a half-second is scrambling out of the sheets, stumbling backwards until he's pressed against a heavy wooden bed frame. He feels around for his wand but it's not in his pockets, nor anywhere nearby.

He begins to panic.

The man who has stormed into the bedroom, whose face is twisted into a vicious snarl and who is advancing toward Harry with what appears to be murderous intent, looks frighteningly familiar.

"What—" Harry croaks.

Tom Riddle slams a copy of the Daily Prophet onto the mattress between them. It takes Harry a long, bewildering moment to tear his gaze from this young, healthy, normal-looking version of his arch nemesis. And when he finally does, his eyes track a front cover spread that has—well— *Harry* , all over it.

"Well?" Riddle snarls.

Harry stares at the moving picture of himself. He's pictured stumbling, visibly inebriated, traipsing after a random man into a darkened alleyway. The man presses Harry up against the wall and proceeds to—

Harry gapes at it. His mouth goes dry.

"Explain yourself," Riddle says, his words developing a sort of strangled hiss. Harry flinches. He tries to shift further back on instinct, but the headboard is unyielding against his back.

"I don't…" Harry's eyes dart around the unfamiliar room for a weapon. Where the hell is his wand?

Cold fingers wrap around his jaw. Riddle squeezes his face just enough to cause a slight discomfort, and Harry goes perfectly still. His mind flashes for a split-second to the graveyard, to the bubbling cauldron, the splash of blood on headstones and Cedric's cold, unseeing eyes. But that was years ago, by now. Harry knows that. He feels a painful headache building in his forehead. This has to be a dream. Right? How did he get here? Where was he before this? Somewhere quiet and peaceful, calm, and he had been speaking with Dumbledore about something important…

"Let me go," Harry finally murmurs in a quiet, whimpering breath.

"No," Riddle sneers. "When I ask my husband a question, I expect a prompt response."

Husband?

Harry inhales sharply. He must make some kind of pained sound, or jerk his head a little too hard, because Riddle finally lets him go.

"You…" Harry starts.

The memories are spilling around in his brain like water sloshing in a giant mixing bowl. It had been the final battle at Hogwarts. Voldemort had asked him to give himself up. Harry had marched through the forest. He had been ready to die.

He *had* died.

"Where am I?" Harry blurts out, staring at Riddle furiously, his cheeks heating. He thinks that this must be some sort of trick. Maybe, instead of killing Harry, Voldemort decided to keep him alive, to torment him, to lock him in this alternate reality while he slowly goes insane. "How did I get here? And where's my wand?"

Riddle laughs, casual and cruel. "Oh, this is rich. You can't seriously still be inebriated."

Harry's bewilderment continues to mount. He stares at Riddle with his mouth slightly open, his eyes wide and his heart racing.

Tom stalks closer and Harry flinches but all he does is stab an accusing finger down at the Daily Prophet. Harry glances at it again, unwillingly. His stomach twists.

“We’ll continue this discussion later,” Riddle says harshly when Harry doesn’t respond, “but I won’t stand for much more of this. I’ll be having words with your parents and we will find a solution to your behavior.”

He whirls about and stalks out of the room, the air crackling with the anger of his magic. The door slams harshly behind him.

Harry flinches again. He sits there for who knows how long, his gaze vacant, his shoulders hunched. His thoughts race.

“No, no, no,” he mumbles to himself a few times. He shakes his head. He squeezes his eyes tightly shut and wraps his arms around himself. “This isn’t… real. It’s not real. It’s a dream. Or I’m… I’m dead? And this is—the afterlife?”

His mind snags on that train of thought. Could this be some kind of punishment?

There were so many more people he could have saved. So many people who gave their lives for him, only for him to throw it all away at the end. Harry remembers the oddly white, empty, quiet place he had drifted in for some time after the forest. He doesn’t really remember what happened there. What he and Dumbledore talked about. If he thinks too hard, his forehead starts to pound.

He rubs at it frustratedly. “I think maybe I took the wrong train,” he murmurs absently to himself, and then blinks. His gaze drifts back down to the Daily Prophet. He studies it.

> “ *Potter Heir Caught Yet Again—Minister Riddle Already Regretting his Marriage to the Young Socialite?* ”

The date on the edge of the paper says August 29th, 1960.

“1960?” Harry repeats aloud. His chest suddenly feels constricted. He closes his eyes and tries to take slow, steady breaths.

Wherever he is, *whenever* he is… it’s nowhere he’s ever been before.

And the only connection so far he has to this place is—Tom Riddle. Lord Voldemort. The man who, only an hour ago—or at least, that’s what it feels like to Harry—killed him by his own hand with one final *Avada Kedavra.*

Harry knows he should get up, should look around, should prepare himself for whatever is coming next. He should find his wand. Instead, he lets himself sink down into the soft sheets. He burrows deep beneath the mountain blankets and is asleep in a matter of seconds.

***

“Master Potter.”

Someone’s shaking Harry very gently by the shoulders. He shifts and groans.

“Bitsy is fetching Master Potter for his bath. He is getting up. It is hours and hours ago he was to be out of bed.”

The voice is strict, but carefully restrained, as if afraid of inciting anger. Harry yawns and rolls over in bed. The sheets feel so nice, the soft blankets wrapped around him. He buries his face against the pillow and inhales deeply. That was probably the best sleep he’s had since—

Since—

Harry’s eyes shoot open and he nearly throws himself off the bed, stumbling through the sheets and falling to his knees on the floor beside an unfamiliar house elf.

“Fuck,” he mutters. “Not a dream. *Definitely* not a dream.”

The house elf cocks her head at him. She’s uncommonly short, even for an elf, with big floppy ears and dressed in a pair of simple white robes. She has an oversized bath towel slung over one shoulder.

“What—” Harry starts.

“Now, if you please, Master Potter,” she taps her foot impatiently, seeming nervous. “Bitsy is not wishing to upset Master Riddle. He is saying Master Potter is resting for too long.”

Harry gapes at her and scrubs vigorously at his eyes. He looks around the room once more, cataloging everything he didn’t catch from the night before.

“Erm, sorry, but I don’t… what? A bath?” He mumbles, looking back at the house elf. She raises an eyebrow and nods.

“Master Potter is needing it desperately,” she adds, wrinkling her nose slightly.

Harry looks down at himself. He appears to be in the same outfit he wore in that photo in the Daily Prophet—a pair of tight denim jeans and a white shirt that is rumpled and smells strongly of vodka.

He wracks his brain, trying to remember any of that. It feels like someone else. He knows that it’s him, the picture, that’s indisputable—but it also *wasn’t* him.

“I guess I, erm, forgot to change into my pyjamas last night,” he says, feeling slightly sheepish, although he’s not sure why.

The house elf sighs deeply. She squares her shoulders and marches forward, grabbing him around the elbow and tugging him toward one of the doors at the back of his bedroom.

“Wait, no, I can—it’s okay, I can do it myself—” Harry protests, even more so when the ornate, lavish bathroom is revealed. He swallows thickly and stares at the gigantic, claw foot bathtub and the ridiculous array of products on the shelves beside it.

The house elf scoffs. “Master Potter is feeling funny, this morning,” she says with a dry chuckle. “‘By myself.’ Master Potter isn’t knowing how to bathe himself. He is needing to be scrubbed down every day like a little baby.”

Harry is startled into a confused, affronted silence. He allows the house elf to tug him right over to the bathtub. She snaps her fingers and it fills with warm, soapy, soft-looking water.

“In,” she orders, snapping her fingers again and making all of Harry’s soiled clothes disappear. He yelps and, unsure what else to do, clambers into the tub. The elf wastes no time in rolling back the sleeves of her robes and getting to work. She conjures a sponge and scrubs vigorously across Harry’s neck and shoulders, his chest, and the rest of his body, humming absently to herself and occasionally making quiet, grumbling complaints under her breath and darting narrowed eyes up at Harry as if daring him to respond.

The water is the perfect temperature. At first, Harry is too disoriented to do anything but sit there perfectly still, his arms wrapped around his legs, his eyes trained on the ceiling as this elf cleans him in places he isn’t sure he has paid attention to in months. It feels... nice. And a quiet part of him aches at the thought of those months spent camping out in the tent with Ron and Hermione, cramped for space, settling for cleaning charms and handwashing beside freezing cold rivers and lakes.

But thinking about them for too long gets him thinking about where they are, and where he is, and how he appears to be stuck in this odd alternate reality where Tom Riddle is the minister for magic and apparently Harry’s *husband* . Harry flinches and apologizes when his movement jostles the water.

“Bitsy is not getting paid enough for this,” the house elf says with a huff.

“Paid?” Harry asks without thinking, incredulous.

She pauses her ministrations with the sponge and scowls at him. “Yes, Master Harry. Bitsy is paid a fair allowance and spends it as she pleases. And Bitsy does not care what Master Harry thinks, because she is being under the service of Master Riddle, not Master Harry.” She sniffs airily and then resumes her cleaning.

Harry splutters for words. For what feels like the hundredth time in the past twenty four hours, his thoughts are reeling.

“I wasn’t,” he tries. “I didn’t mean anything by it… Bitsy. I’m very happy to hear that you are making wages here.” He swallows nervously at the piercing gaze she fixes him with.

“Good,” she responds. She presses on his chest with a surprisingly strong hand until he lies back, submerging his hair in the warm water. Bitsy massages a thick, luxurious-smelling shampoo into his hair until his eyes are drifting shut and he’s half asleep, fully content. She’s still muttering under her breath, occasionally humming, and jerks his head up out of the water to apply conditioner. Harry follows her queues wordlessly. It’s a strange feeling, having someone else bathe him. The last person who did that for him was Aunt Petunia, although those memories make his hands shake and his eyes close in trepidation. He still can’t smell certain kinds of soaps without panicking.

Bitsy isn’t like that, though. Her movements are quick and efficient, but not harsh or painful. She’s thorough, and methodical, and clearly takes pride in her work, regardless of how little she seems to respect Harry himself.

“Finished,” she announces some time later, snapping her fingers to drain the water. Harry jerks out of his pleasant daze and clambers to his feet, allowing Bitsy to wrap him in a fluffy bathrobe.

“Er… thank you?” Harry is tugged along behind the house elf as she moves them back into the bedroom, prodding him toward the bed where a stack of clothing is waiting for him.

Bitsy scoffs and folds her arms, waiting for him to get dressed. “Bitsy is only doing her job, Master Potter,” she says, sounding annoyed.

Harry frowns, feeling uncomfortable, but dresses himself as quickly as he can.

This clothing is on a whole other level from the casual muggle clothes he had woken up in. There is a pair of soft socks, and a comfortable pair of gray slacks that fit perfectly. Then a thin white undershirt paired with an expensive-looking button up. He pulls on a cashmere sweater over it and then finishes off the look with a thick, heavy cloak that is dark green and feels handmade.

Bitsy watches him like a hawk, making small adjustments here and there until she’s satisfied that he looks presentable. It makes Harry feel a little bit like a doll. His cheeks flame, and he’s glad when Bitsy claps her hands together and grabs him by the elbow again to tow him out of the room and down a flight of winding stairs.

“Master Riddle is being angry,” she warns him in an undertone. “Master Potter would do well to sit quietly and eat his food and be a good husband.”

Harry misses a step behind her. He had almost forgotten about that. The fact that he has a *husband* . That it’s Tom Riddle.

“Master Potter?” she prods him.

“Yeah, erm, okay,” he stammers. His heartbeat is starting to pick up and he can hardly think straight. All of his calm and ease from the bath has melted away and the tension is seeping back into his shoulders.

Bitsy shoots him an odd look. “Master Potter is feeling funny today,” she says again, looking him up and down. “He is not being himself.”

Harry holds back a hysterical laugh.

No, he is not feeling like himself.

Not at all.

Chapter 2: 2

Chapter Notes

minor edits 7/31

Breakfast is quiet, and— *weird.*

Riddle is seated at the head of a ridiculously large dining table, surrounded by stacks of documents and with his brow furrowed. He barely acknowledges Harry when Bitsy leads him in.

“Master Potter,” Bitsy announces, pushing Harry into the chair at the opposite end of the table and then promptly disappearing from the room.

Harry swallows. His mouth feels uncomfortably dry, and he doesn’t quite know what to do with his hands. He eventually settles them on his lap and then rotates his gaze from his plate, to the ceiling, and then to Riddle. There’s a breath of silence, and then a slight pop and Harry’s plate is filled with a variety of familiar breakfast foods. His mouth begins to water immediately. He grabs the glass of pumpkin juice in front of him and has drunk half of it before he glances up and catches Riddle’s eye and nearly chokes. His hand slips on the glass and he spills some of it down his front.

“Charming,” Riddle says, his lip curling. His eyes dart back down to the document in front of him.

Harry’s cheeks redden. He feels humiliated, like a child, which is confusing. He doesn’t understand their dynamic at all. Just a short time ago, this man wanted him dead. He would have done anything to make it happen. Harry had stood across from him in the forest and waited to die. And now—now he’s not Voldemort, as far as Harry can tell. He’s just… Tom Riddle. And he’s seated calmly across the table from Harry, making disparaging comments about his social faux pas.

Harry scrubs fruitlessly at the stain on his front and then sighs. “Morning, anyway,” he grumbles, setting the pumpkin juice back on the table.

For just a moment, Riddle tenses. His eyes flicker up to look at Harry and he seems incredulous. Then he scowls.

“Don’t try to play nice with me today, darling,” he says. “I’m not in the mood.”

Harry frowns and stabs at a pile of potatoes with his fork. It makes a screeching sound on the plate and he hopes viciously that the noise is disturbing Riddle’s concentration.

“Eat,” Riddle orders. “I’m sure you didn’t have much last night besides copious amounts of alcohol. I won’t have you hungover and empty-headed when we see your parents this evening.”

Harry jerks in his seat and drops his fork, staring across the table at Riddle with wide eyes.

“My… what? What did you say?”

Harry doesn’t want to say the words. He doesn’t want to jinx it. Of all of the things that this terrifying place doesn’t have, of all the ways it’s horrifyingly different, maybe… Maybe this is why he’s here. Nothing’s perfect, he’s stuck married to a sociopath, he still can’t find his wand, but maybe he has his parents. Maybe he has a family.

Riddle stares at him like he has two heads. “Your parents,” he repeats slowly. “We’re having dinner with them tonight, as we do on a weekly basis. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten again?”

Harry gapes at him. “My parents? My parents James and Lily? They’re *al*— I mean, erm, they’re coming over? Today?” He’s nearly bouncing off the edge of his seat.

Riddle’s gaze narrows. He sneers, seeming highly unamused. “Are you daft? How much did you really drink last night? Yes, your parents James and Lily.” He shakes his head. “Who else would it be? Do you have another pair of snobby parents I haven’t met?”

Harry’s excitement falters slightly. He tries to reel himself back in. To force himself back to the reality of his situation. Because—yes, he sort of does. Have other parents, that is. (It’s only that those parents have been dead for nearly seventeen years.) He grimaces. “I’m… sorry,” he murmurs. “Of course, I… I think I’m just feeling a little tired.”

Riddle gives him another odd, criticizing look.

“Apologizing? To your dear husband?” He muses. “I never thought I’d see the day. What is it that you want from me this time, Harry?”

Harry stares at him, uncomprehending. “Er…”

Riddle rolls his eyes. “Well? Out with it. Whatever it is, you won’t be getting it until I see some better behavior. You can bat your eyes at me and feign regret over your actions as much as you want, but you won’t fool me.”

Harry’s jaw drops and he feels another shocked, mortified blush spread over his cheeks. “I wasn’t… I don’t, er, there’s nothing—” he peters off and fidgets with the table cloth, feeling confused. Riddle is looking at him again like he’s an immature, misbehaving child. That’s how Bitsy has been treating him as well. Harry doesn’t know how to respond to this. He doesn’t know how he’s going to survive here if even a genuine apology doesn’t appease his new husband.

“Bitsy,” Riddle says, cutting straight through Harry’s thoughts. The house elf pops into the room and bows slightly.

“Master Riddle,” she says.

“Please return Harry to his chambers.” Riddle stands from the table and gathers his documents into an organized stack. “I’m afraid he still needs a little bit more time to rest and recuperate from his activities last night.” Riddle sneers at Harry one last time and then stalks out of the room with a whirl of his cloak.

Harry half-stands out of his chair, bumping the table and spilling more pumpkin juice. “But, wait, I was— *Tom* —!”

He wants to hear more about his parents. If this really is a dream, what if he wakes up before he can see them? But then Bitsy is at his side again, vanishing his half-eaten plate and taking him by the elbow to return back upstairs.

She wrinkles her nose at his soiled robe. “Master Potter is spilling on himself again?” she says reproachfully.

“I didn’t… I didn’t mean to,” Harry says, stumbling after her in a daze.

“Always making a mess,” she tuts. “Master Potter is never making Master Riddle happy that way.”

Harry doesn’t respond. His hands are beginning to shake again, and there’s an odd, pinching, ringing in his ears, and his heart is in his throat. “No, this isn’t… I don’t think it’s real,” he says quietly to himself once they’re back in the bedroom and Bitsy is magicking the pumpkin juice out of his clothes. She glances up at him sharply.

“Master Potter?”

He glances down at the house elf and tries to smile, but his face crumples. “I can’t… I don’t think I can— do this, I can’t—”

“I think you is needing a lie down, Master Potter,” Bitsy says, in the softest tone he’s heard her use yet.

When Harry hears it, he feels like crying. He takes in a deep, shuddering breath. “Can you call me Harry? Please?”

Bitsy looks at him askance, but she seems to have sensed that he’s in some sort of tumultuous mood because she only protests half-heartedly.

“It’s not proper,” she scolds him lightly.

“Please,” he repeats. He sways on his feet, allowing Bitsy to undo his extravagant cloak and hang it in the closet. She guides him over to the bed and he crawls into the sheets without a fuss, his body aching and his mind numb.

“If Master Potter wishes Bitsy to call him Harry, then Bitsy is doing it,” she murmurs quietly. She pulls up the sheets around him and he feels the ghost of a wrinkled hand ruffling his hair and pressing to his forehead.

“Thank you Bitsy,” he mumbles, sinking back into another deep sleep.

***

Harry finally looks at himself in the mirror for the first time later that night, when Bitsy's woken him once again and warned him to come down for dinner.

He was expecting to look like… himself. But the Harry staring back at him through the glass is something else.

There's no scar, for one. The lightning bolt that had, up until now, defined his entire life. Harry presses his hand to his forehead, feeling for any kind of sensation, anything that will tell him that this is still his body.

Nothing. Harry continues squinting at himself. His eyes are bright green, a piercing gaze, one entirely unmarred by the barrier of glasses—

Glasses.

Harry leans closer to the mirror. He runs his finger up over the line of his nose. "No glasses," he murmurs to himself, confused. "Where… why…?"

Harry is bewildered to realise that he can see *just fine.* A little too fine, if he thinks about it. His vision is practically razor-sharp. He wonders how that came to be. He wonders if the other-Harry was lucky enough to be born with perfect vision, or perhaps his parents could afford some kind of magically-advanced eye-treatment to cure his vision problems. Harry stares at his face a bit longer and then shrugs out of his sweater and unbuttons his shirt, inspecting his bare arms and his chest and his stomach.

No, this body is not his. It is still small, and thin but in a softer way, not in the half-starved, living-on-the-run way that Harry's body had become after their year hunting horcruxes. This body has clearly lived a gentle life. No scars, no bruises, no burn marks on the chest. No faintly red words on his hand reading "I must not tell lies."

Harry's mouth twists into a wry smile. He should be feeling relieved—to have an empty slate, a new body to work with that has not been damaged in any way. But—there is no feeling of relief. There is only horror. This body is not his, and—he does not belong in this world.

There's a sharp rap on the door to the bathroom then, and Bitsy's muffled voice filters through.

"Lord Potter and Lady Potter request Master Potter's presence in the dining room," she announces.

"Lord and Lady," Harry repeats under his breath in disbelief, shaking his head to dispel his panicked thoughts, hastily re-buttoning his shirt and slipping out of the bathroom. Bitsy hardly has to drag him along, this time. She keeps one arm tucked into the crook of his elbow but Harry is nearly knocking her off her feet in his hurry to get downstairs and see his parents.

***

These aren't Harry's parents.

He knows that the second he gets close enough to his mother. Lily Potter looks just like she did in all of the pictures, at least.

But she is not his mother.

Harry makes a beeline for her anyway, the second his feet step off the last step of the winding stairs. He collapses right into her arms, his head tucking into the crook of her neck. Her soft, vibrant red hair tickles his cheek. She smells faintly of vanilla and honey.

"Mum," he says, feeling a thick lump in his throat. He has spent most of his life wondering what this would feel like. How it would feel to be held in his mother's arms. Harry thinks maybe he came close, when Mrs. Weasley hugged him after the triwizard tournament. She had clutched him close to her bosom and had stroked his hair, murmuring kind words into his ear and easing some of his trembling. But he had known that it wasn't real. She hadn't been his mother, and she had her own family to return to at the end of the day. So Harry hadn't allowed himself to fully enjoy the embrace.

His mother pats his back, and it takes a second for her arms to come up around him in return.

"Harry," she coos, stroking the back of his head, her tone cool and restrained. "Goodness, this is quite the display. I can't quite remember the last time you hugged me."

He soaks up as much time as he can in her arms, but can't help feeling how stiff she is holding herself, and so he reluctantly takes a step back.

"Sorry," he mumbles. He looks at her keenly from head to toe. He can feel tears pooling in the corners of his eyes and he desperately holds them back. "I just… I missed you, mum."

She sniffs and then smiles cordially at him. "How sweet."

Someone clears their throat beside her and Harry shifts his attention over to—James Potter.

Not his father.

This man also looks just like he did in Harry's photos. Perhaps a bit taller, a bit sterner, a serious curve to his jawline that Harry hadn't noticed before. He looks down at Harry with an expression that, for a moment, is eerily similar to one he would see on the face of Lucius Malfoy. Harry takes a small, unconscious step back. He finds himself searching the room for Bitsy, who has somehow become the only welcoming face in this bizarre household.

"Harry," James says, inclining his head.

"Hullo, erm," Harry stumbles over his words. He wants to say 'dad,' but it doesn't feel quite right. "Father."

"Yes, well," his father says, turning about in a sweep of his robes and walking toward the dining table. "Let's get this over with, shall we?"

Harry feels someone's arm grasp his elbow and he glances over, unable to contain his flinch when he sees that it's not Bitsy, but Tom Riddle standing at his side.

"Come on," his husband hisses in his ear. "And would it kill you to behave normally for one evening?"

Harry stumbles along, a few steps behind him, and finds himself seated at the table next to Riddle and across from his parents.

Food appears on their plates a half second later. Bitsy pops in, individually pouring each of them a glass of a deep red wine. Harry's glass is the only one left unfilled. He shoots a questioning glance at Riddle but the man's gaze darkens and he shakes his head slightly.

Alright then.

Most of the meal is taken up with Riddle and James Potter discussing a myriad of political topics that go right over Harry's head. He gives up on trying to interpret all of the political jargon and instead focuses his attention on his mother. She eats slowly and carefully, barely even appearing to chew or swallow. It's—graceful, and calculated, and—very disconcerting. Harry emulates her movements the best that he can. He's already messed up enough here, it seems, even if that was the *other* Harry and not him at all, he apparently is the one that has to deal with the consequences. And even if this is all a dream, or some kind of pre-death vision, Harry doesn't want to mess up. He wants his parents to be proud of him, even if they're not

really his parents at all. He wants to be able to enjoy his time with them, however limited it may be.

Of course, that's when one of his mistakes comes up in conversation. Harry is zoned out, only half paying attention, and thinking of how likely Bitsy would be to slip him some treacle tart if he asked nicely.

"...won't be happening again, I assure you," Riddle's cool, professional voice slips past his distracted thoughts. Harry straightens up in his seat.

"I should hope not," Harry's father says, his lip curling with disdain. "It reflects very poorly on our name. I am beginning to wonder if this match isn't suitable after all. One year of marriage, and already countless scandals to clean up after. If you can't control your husband, then we will have to take further action."

Harry sinks back into his seat, his face and neck reddening. *Countless scandals?* He wonders what exactly the other Harry was getting into. And what was the point? It seems he had the perfect setup. A wealthy family, a beautiful home, a successful husband. Why did he feel the need to seek out muggle bars, to have sexual encounters with random men?

Harry feels like he's missing something.

"Everything is under control," Riddle responds calmly, although Harry can see the thick tension in his shoulders, and the angry clench to his jaw. "Harry was under the influence of his ill-intentioned friends. He has agreed to remain here at the manor indefinitely from now on, except for approved outings, until we can rectify this behavior. I am certain he won't make the same mistake again."

Harry stiffens in alarm. He wishes he understood even a little bit of what they're talking about. What friends? And—approved outings? What does that mean? He doesn't like the sound of being locked down in this house with nowhere to go and no one to talk to except Tom fucking Riddle and a house elf. How is he supposed to figure out what's going on? How will he find a way to get back to his own life? How will he survive here? He opens his mouth to say something, but his father cuts in.

"Yes, well, we have cautioned Harry time and again to choose his friends wisely. But that is not the only issue. You are his husband. You must show Harry who he belongs to. These kinds of humiliations will simply not stand."

Harry's eyes widen, and his mouth clicks shut. He feels a cold chill go down his spine. He sits there rigidly at the table, the words of his father and his husband washing over him like some kind of smothering slime. He tries to speak up a few more times, but words fail him. And it seems that Riddle and Harry's father aren't interested in including him in the conversation. His mother doesn't participate either, beyond the occasional bored nod or hum of agreement.

This is so far beyond what Harry always imagined when he thought about his parents. He knew they loved him unconditionally. They died for him, after all. But these people…

They can hardly stand to even look at him.

Harry has a hard time following the conversation after that. He feels that odd buzzing in his ears again, and his hands start to shake, and his chest feels tight. Every few moments he pats his pants for his wand, but it's never there.

Where is it?

He isn't sure if it's minutes or hours later, but eventually there is the scraping of chairs, the clinking of glasses, and the shuffling of feet. Then a tension-filled silence descends on the room. Harry blinks and straightens up. Riddle is standing beside his chair, mouth arranged in a spiteful sneer.

"Er," Harry says. He looks around and realizes his parents have long gone.

"We're lucky they didn't want to stay for dessert," Riddle says, his voice venomous.

Harry swallows and looks down at his now-empty plate. He can't remember if he ate anything. "I don't, erm…" he pauses. "What was that about, I mean… staying here… indefinitely? I can't," he pauses again. "I can't even go outside, you mean?"

Riddle scowls at him. "We've been over this, *husband* . I've warned you time and again that your actions would have consequences. I have tried to be understanding. But if I can't trust your behavior outside of this household, if you're going to continue to humiliate me and make a mess of yourself, then in this manor you will have to stay. "

Harry blanches. Then he tries to smooth his expression. "Right. Okay. So. Can I at least have my wand then?"

Riddle's scowl, if possible, deepens even further. "You can't be serious."

"I am," Harry says.

"I don't have your bloody wand," Riddle snarls. "I assume your father still has it. Have you already forgotten the day that he confiscated it?"

Harry rears back at the look on Riddle's face. He thinks hard. He tries again to pull up any relevant memories. He thinks—if he is really in the body of a Harry that was born in this universe, where did those memories go? Where did that Harry *go?*

"No, I… I'm sorry. I can't remember."

"Let me jog your memory." Riddle taps his chin in mock thought. "Oh, that's right. You attempted to confund an auror. Does that ring any bells?"

Harry gapes at him.

Riddle's jaw clenches. "You were making a fool of yourself in Diagon Alley, high out of your mind. He was going to put you in custody for drunk and disorderly conduct. You took out your wand and tried to confund him in clear sight of about fifty muggles. And, to make it

worse, your spell backfired. The only thing you accomplished was embarrassing yourself. Then, after all of that, you very publicly attempted to bribe him."

Harry sits back in his chair, reeling.

Riddle sneers at him. "You're lucky to have the wealth of your parents at your disposal. Your father paid off the auror quietly and managed to cover the whole thing up. And in return, you agreed to give up your wand."

"I'm…" Harry fumbles for words. "I don't understand." he blinks up at Riddle, who is glaring down at him.

"I no longer waste any effort in trying to understand why you do the things you do," he says. "I can only afford to protect my own name and reputation. I thought marrying you would elevate me further in society. As of yet, you continue to drag me lower and lower."

Riddle turns away from him and stalks out of the room. Harry wants to get up from his seat, to run after him, to demand more details about this other Harry and the things he's done. But his legs feel like jello, and he can hardly breathe, and his hands are still shaking.

This is not where he is supposed to be. He's supposed to be back at Hogwarts, with Ron and Hermione at his side. Or maybe at the burrow. Everything was supposed to be over. He destroyed all the horcruxes, and killed Voldemort, and did everything he was supposed to do. Harry doesn't even know if Ron and Hermione exist in this universe. (Of course, even if they do, they aren't going to be his Ron and Hermione. They will be something *other,* just like James and Lily, and just like Tom Riddle.)

Harry's chest feels tighter and tighter until he's stuck in his chair, sitting up rigidly straight, making quiet little gasps for air and blinking rapidly. There's a light popping sound and then Bitsy's hand wraps around his elbow. Harry exhales heavily and deflates.

"Bitsy is here to return Master Harry to his chambers," Bitsy says delicately, looking at him. She seems to be speaking a little softer than she usually does.

Harry nods tightly. He can't speak. He allows her to guide him up off the chair, out of the dining room and up the stairs to his bedroom. He stands there, staring blankly at the wall while the house elf changes him into a soft dressing gown and slippers.

"Is Master Harry being a good husband?" Bitsy asks quietly, finally breaking the silence. Harry blinks down at her.

"What? Oh, erm…" he tries to force a smile but fails. He shrugs. "Yeah, it was, er, fine. The dinner was fine."

Bitsy squints at him.

"My parents are angry," Harry admits, his tone dull. "Because of what he— because of what… I did. In the, erm. The papers."

"And that is why Master Harry is upset?"

Harry shrugs. “I suppose,” he says. “They wouldn’t even… they didn’t even…” he trails off and bites his lip. He doesn’t know how to express what it is exactly that he’s feeling, at least not without revealing his imposterhood.

“Bitsy thinks that Master Harry does not like his parents, nor does he care what they think of him in return,” she says carefully.

Harry thinks about that and then swallows hard. “I dunno, I guess not. It’s just…” he scrubs a weary hand over his face. “It felt like… like I hadn’t seen them in a very long time. I thought they might… be happy to see me.”

Bitsy’s eyes soften and she adjusts a piece of his dressing gown.

“Master Harry must try to be better,” she says gently. “Then perhaps he is being a good son and a good husband and everything is being better.”

Harry manages a smile, then. It’s true. He’s not the old Harry, the one that apparently slept around and lied and drank too much and made his husband and parents unhappy. Now that he’s here, things will change. He can turn them into a proper family again. He can earn back his wand, and do some research, and figure out what the hell is going on, and how the hell he got here in the first place.

“I’m sure you’re right, Bitsy. Thank you,” he says. She nods at him and then gestures for him to climb into the bed.

“Of course, Master Harry. Rest now. Bitsy will return in the morning for Master Harry’s bath,” she says quietly before seeing herself out.

Chapter 3: 3

Chapter Summary

bonding time for Harry and Bitsy

Chapter Notes

thank you for all of the kind comments! <3
minor edits made on 7/31

This time, when Harry falls asleep in the ridiculously large bed with the extravagantly soft sheets, he dreams. And it seems that even here, in this odd world with everything flipped upside down and sideways, he can't escape the horrors of his past. When he wakes mid-scream, his throat hoarse, his clothes soaked with sweat and chest heaving, Bitsy is there.

"Cedric," he says in a choked breath, his eyes wheeling around in a daze. "Not—please, not him. I can't—I couldn't. I need to bring his body back. Please, please don't—" he shivers and his body wracks with a heavy sob.

"Master Harry," Bitsy murmurs, her eyes wide.

Harry feels about on the bed in a panic. "Where's my wand? I can't—please, it hurts." He grips his forearm and grimaces.

"Master Harry," Bitsy repeats. Her voice has gained a frantic edge. "Master Harry is safe in his bed. He is not needing a wand."

Harry struggles to twist out of the tangled and soaked sheets until Bitsy snaps her fingers and he's blissfully free. He blinks and looks around the room again, disoriented. "Where am I?"

Bitsy inhales sharply and grips Harry by the elbow, tugging him out of bed. "Master Harry is in his chambers," she says slowly, as if she is speaking to a child. "He is needing a fresh wash." She pulls him into the bathroom and starts the bath.

Harry stares at her. "But, I was… I was just…" he trails off. He glances at himself in the mirror and stumbles back, his knees hitting the porcelain edge of the tub. His face in the mirror is ghostly pale, his lips a deep red, like he'd been biting on them in his sleep. And his scar and glasses are gone.

Right.

Harry sways in place until Bitsy vanishes his dressing gown and guides him down into the tub.

“I… I forgot,” he mumbles, shivering when the warm water splashes over his cold sweat-soaked skin.

“Forgot what, Master Harry?”

He doesn’t respond. Bitsy hums quietly as she scrubs him down. When she tries to push him down to wet his hair, Harry resists.

“Stop, I don’t—I can’t—don’t want to—”

“Master Harry is safe here,” Bitsy says, sounding disconcerted. “It is only a bath. It is warm water and sweet-smelling soaps.”

“No, I’m not—” Harry trembles. “I was at… at Hogwarts, I was, and then in the forest, and Vol— he *killed* me. I’m not supposed to be—not supposed to be here. I thought I took the train. Didn’t I? And, and… Dumbledore said I could see my parents again. He promised. I can’t, I don’t know why I’m—”

Bitsy’s brow furrows and she interrupts him. *“Killed* you? Master Harry is not being dead now, is he?”

Harry hesitates. He searches his jumble of thoughts and memories. “I don’t… I dunno. I don’t think so?”

Bitsy nods. “Master Harry is being alive and in the tub, now, yes he is. And he is needing to lie back so that Bitsy can wash his hair.” Harry blinks at her and this time when she pushes down on his chest again, he relents. Bitsy scrubs at his scalp and works the same sweet shampoo into it from the other day. Harry closes his eyes.

“What song is that?” he asks after a while, his voice hoarse. Bitsy abruptly stops singing and seems uncomfortable.

“It is being a nursery rhyme from Bitsy’s childhood, Master Harry,” she finally says, sounding apprehensive. “Bitsy sings while she works, but she will not if it makes Master Harry unhappy.”

“No,” he says quickly, his face falling. “It’s—it’s alright, Bitsy. I thought it was nice. You don’t have to… could you keep going, please?”

Bitsy stares at him for long enough that he feels an embarrassed flush spread up his neck and over his face. Finally, she nods. Harry sighs with relief and then lets himself get ducked back under the water to rinse conditioner from his hair. Bitsy starts her singing back up, louder this time, no longer timid and under her breath. Her voice isn’t very good. It’s shaky, and brittle, and slightly off-key. But Harry doesn’t mind. He doesn’t think he’s ever been sung to before. Not like this. Not while he’s submerged in a perfectly warm bath, bubbles floating around in

the air, Bitsy's gnarled hands massaging the tension from his shoulders and detangling knots from his hair.

This bath takes far longer than the first one Bitsy gave him. She sings until her voice is hoarse, and Harry's hands and feet start to wrinkle in the water. It's only when he feels himself falling back asleep, his head drifting forward and his eyelids fluttering, that Bitsy drains the water and helps him into his bathrobe.

"The sun has not yet risen," Bitsy says, peering up at Harry. "Does Master Harry wish to return to sleep?"

Harry shakes his head. "No," he says firmly, although his limbs ache and his eyes are drooping from exhaustion. "No, please, thank you."

Bitsy nods, like she was expecting this. "Bitsy is serving breakfast in three hours," she says. "Does Master Harry wish to remain in his chambers until then?"

Harry winces. He looks around the bedroom in dismay. Aside from an array of overly-lavish decorations, and an assortment of what seems to be makeup products and lotions, and gossip magazines, there is not much else to entertain him. "Erm," he says, stalling for time. "Do I have to?"

Bitsy eyes him critically. "Master Riddle is telling Bitsy that Master Harry must remain in the manor." She raises her eyebrows at him.

Harry thinks for a moment. "Er, okay… is there—do we have a erm… somewhere else to… a library, maybe?"

The house elf smiles. "Of course, Master Harry. The house of Riddle is having one of the most magnificent libraries in all of wizarding Britain. But Master Harry is not knowing, because he is never visiting. He is never opening a book once in the entire year he is being here, except for his gossip magazines." Her voice sharpens with a slight reprimand.

Harry feels himself color with embarrassment yet again. He knows it wasn't him, it was the other Harry, but Bitsy has no way of knowing that. "Right…" he says. "Well, I guess I'm overdue for a visit, then."

Bitsy nods approvingly. "Master Harry must dress himself," she says, pointing to the clothes resting on the bed waiting for him. "Then he is coming with Bitsy and she is finding him a book to read."

***

Harry thinks that Bitsy must be right. The library is the biggest one he's ever seen—not large enough to rival Hogwarts, of course, but still an incredible sight. He walks around, eyeing the shelves in awe.

"This is brilliant. How did he get all of these books? Where—Hermione will be so jealous —"

Bitsy tugs at Harry's hand when he pauses.

"Stop that," she orders him. "Master Harry is not thinking about being dead anymore." She pushes him into a comfy armchair and places a book in his lap. Harry opens it numbly to the first page.

"'Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do,'" he reads slowly, and then looks at the front cover. "Alice in Wonderland?"

Bitsy nods.

Harry cocks his head. He thinks back to vague memories of trying to read this very book in primary school, before Dudley had thrown it into a puddle. "But this is… isn't this a muggle book?"

Bitsy shrugs. "Master Riddle is keeping every kind of book in his library. He is not caring about muggles or wizards or other beings writing them."

Harry blinks. A bemused grin lifts the corner of his mouth. "Okay, I guess. I'll… I'll give it a go. Thanks, Bitsy." Harry tucks his legs up underneath him on the chair and opens back up to the first page. Bitsy watches him for a moment and then pops away. After a few moments, there's another popping sound and the table next to him is filled with a mug of hot cocoa and a plate of biscuits.

Harry's chest fills with a tight, warm emotion. He reaches out to the plate and takes a tentative bite of one of the biscuits.

To think that of all of the places he might find comfort in this strange world, he would find it in a library. Harry tries really hard to not think of Hermione again. He settles into his chair and focuses all of his attention on the book.

***

Harry's days begin to pass in the same way. He spends his time somewhere in the manor—usually his chambers, or the library, or the kitchens. He likes to sit near the fire in the mornings and watch Bitsy bake. She won't ever let him help, but she does let him taste-test everything to his heart's content. He hardly, if ever, sees Riddle. Only at meal times, and only when Riddle isn't overly swamped with documents or with meetings or in the middle of some important firecall.

Harry is pleased with that arrangement. He doesn't mind being an afterthought. He hasn't forgotten how he felt after that dinner, when Riddle and his father talked about him as if he wasn't there. No, Harry is perfectly content being invisible. He got plenty of practice doing that with the Dursleys, after all.

And—the more time he spends in the library, the more time he commits to figuring out what, exactly, has happened to him.

Riddle's library is stocked with books on every subject imaginable. Even so, the literature on anything related to Harry's unique situation is depressingly underdeveloped, and—Harry was never very good at this kind of studying. He and Ron always left the books to Hermione. Now Harry only has himself to work with, and his horrid attention span, and no one to ask advice or confide in about his problems. Harry reads all about the killing curse, but he can't find anything about horcruxes although he spends the better part of a weekend searching. There's also nothing much he can find on curse scars, or body-swapping, or alternate universes.

He is close to giving up on research altogether when he stumbles upon a shelf of books relating to Occlumency and Legilimency. Harry thinks back to his torturous lessons with Snape. He had nearly forgotten about the lesser-known discipline. And—

It occurs to him then, as it should have much earlier, that the Tom Riddle in this world is likely to be just as well-versed in Legilimency as Voldemort was. Harry goes perfectly still at that realisation and then shudders. He thinks of all of the times so far that he has made direct eye contact with the man. Luckily, he doesn't recall ever feeling that light brush upon his mind, that hint that someone is trespassing.

But Harry knows that Riddle could be better than that. He could easily delve into Harry's mind without him ever noticing. Harry feels faintly nauseous at the thought. He comforts himself with the knowledge that if Riddle had read his mind by now, he would have immediately known that Harry was an imposter. He certainly wouldn't have continued allowing Harry to stay in the manor without questioning him.

Still—Harry resolves to resume his Occlumency studies immediately. (Just in case.) He sighs heavily and gathers up all of the relevant books he can find, tucking them into the little bag Bitsy gave him so he could port certain books to and from the library and his chambers.

He's begun to amass a small collection of books to keep in his room, ones that he wants to reread, or study further, or ones that he wants to look at without the risk of Riddle stumbling upon him or Bitsy's overly curious eyes. Harry may not be allowed to leave this manor, he may be—in everything but name—a prisoner, a wandless trophy-husband, a disappointing son and a reformed host for a horcrux, a mess of trauma and bad memories, but—he is still Harry. New body, maybe, new family and new problems—but he's always had problems. And he always finds a way to deal with them somehow.

***

Harry's nightmares don't let up. Bitsy develops a sort of routine with him after the third or fourth night that he wakes screaming, soaked in sweat and crying out for Cedric, or for his mother, or for Sirius.

She vanishes his bedsheets, helping him to his feet as quickly as she can. Harry allows her to coax him into the bathroom on stumbling feet, his hands shaking and his chest wracking with sobs. Bitsy comes to learn that there's not much she can say to him. He won't calm either way until he's sitting in the bath, warm water cascading over his hair and Bitsy's strained voice is singing one of her nursery rhymes.

One of the nights like this, she tries to find answers.

"Master Harry is not sleeping well," she remarks, near the end of the bath when Harry is feeling floaty and calm.

"No," he responds faintly.

"What is making Master Harry suffer so?" she asks carefully. "Master Harry is never… he is not having this issue always. Is something… Does Master Harry wish to speak with Master Riddle? Is he being in danger? Is he hurting?"

Harry goes still. He looks away from Bitsy and into the soapy water. "No," he finally says. "Nobody is hurting me, Bitsy. It's just… memories."

"Memories of what, Master Harry?"

Harry starts to tremble again, all of the tension Bitsy worked so hard to erase already coming back. "I didn't mean—it's nothing," he says. "It's not… It's not memories. I shouldn't have said—no. It's, erm, just bad… dreams. They're not real. I've been… stressed."

Bitsy seems skeptical. “But Master Harry has everything he is needing. He is having a warm bed and clothes and a husband. He is having all the money he needs and is spending his days lounging and reading.”

Harry flinches. He stares into the water, beginning to swirl as it goes down the drain. “Yeah,” he says dully. “Of course, Bitsy. I know. You’re right. I’m… I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s come over me.”

Bitsy looks frustrated, then. She squeezes the water out of his hair with a towel and then helps him up and into his bathrobe.

“Bitsy is only trying to understand,” she finally says, her words gentle. She looks up at him with a frown. “Master Riddle is asking Bitsy to look after Master Harry. And Bitsy is not knowing how to do that anymore.”

Harry smiles kindly at the house elf. “It’s alright,” he says. “You *have* been taking very good care of me, Bitsy. This is… this is just something I have to deal with on my own.” He shrugs out of his robe and dresses in the outfit Bitsy has left on the bed. “Don’t worry, okay? And, erm, it’s alright if you don’t want to keep getting up in the middle of the night. I can deal with it. I’ve dealt with it for—” he pauses. “I mean, I’ll be fine. It’s not fair for you to not get any sleep either.”

Bitsy scowls at him. She folds her arms across her chest and taps her foot. “Master Harry is trying to tell Bitsy to not do her job again.”

Harry winces and smiles apologetically. “Ah… right. I’m sorry.”

She crosses her arms and scoffs. “House elves are not needing sleep as much as wizards. Master Harry is not being a bother. He must not insult Bitsy anymore.”

Harry smiles at her and nods. “Okay, I’ll try. I’m sorry. Erm, I think I’m going to lie down for a bit longer.”

Bitsy nods, although her eyes dart to the bed and she eyes him reproachfully. “Master Harry is going to sleep again?”

Harry shakes his head. “Probably not. Just… I’m tired. I’m just going to rest for a bit.”

Bitsy seems mollified then. She exits the room with a snap of her fingers, leaving behind a cup of tea and a slice of bread and butter on his bedside table.

Chapter 4: 4

Chapter Notes

minor edits 1/7

The worst part of Harry's new life, depressingly, are the weekly dinners he and Riddle have to endure with his parents. Harry drags his feet more and more with each one.

He doesn't even really know why he has to be there at all. His mother exchanges a few fake pleasantries with him and then spends the rest of the evening drowning herself in wine. And Harry's father won't even look at him. He just speaks with Riddle about politics, and about money, and a thousand other topics that make Harry grit his teeth and pretend like he's not completely lost. And now that he's confined to the manor and can't make any social blunders, there's nothing to reprimand him for. Nothing to make him the center of attention.

Harry feels sort of like a doll. Or some kind of glorified pet. Bitsy always sets aside his nicest clothes for the night and spends extra time massaging products into his hair and coaching him on how to behave—how to 'be good.'

Riddle doesn't look at him much either, except for a brief once-over at the beginning of each dinner in the first few minutes before Harry's parents arrive. Harry is far too uncomfortable to look him in the eye now that he's remembered Legilimency, and he's too afraid to make a mistake, to do something that will take away even more of his freedoms. So he keeps quiet and keeps his gaze fixed on his feet or on the tips of Bitsy's ears as she serves his mother more and more wine.

And after the third week of his wine glass remaining empty, Harry is certain that the other Harry must have been some kind of alcoholic. He remembers the comments Riddle made that first night, when he shouted about the Daily Prophet article and accused Harry of being drunk.

Just one more thing the other Harry ruined for him.

Harry doesn't eat much at these dinners. He finds it hard to eat at all, when he's seated close to Riddle and when he can feel his father's disapproval permeating the room. His hand shakes when he tries to grip his utensils, and everything he manages to choke down tastes like ash on his tongue. The only time he really eats is when he's alone in the library, nose buried in a book and absently snacking on a plate of cheese and crackers from Bitsy, or sipping on an iced cider, or when she gives him a block of dark chocolate after a particularly harrowing nightmare.

Harry thinks he might be growing skinnier, his cheekbones more defined, and his hair losing some of its luster, although he doesn't pay it much attention. He was used to this happening every summer with the Dursleys, after all. At least here, he's not expected to do the housework and gardening.

Although the gardening—he really wouldn't mind. Harry finds himself perched by the window of his room more and more, staring down at the grounds and thinking about how nice it would be to explore the hedge maze, or the flower garden, or bury his hands in the dirt and pull some weeds. To touch the grass. But Bitsy was very specific when she told him not to leave the manor. And Harry knows not to push his luck. He knows that while his current privileges may seem limited, there's always something to be taken away.

***

It's Harry's fourth or fifth week stuck in this world when Riddle comes across him in the library.

Harry is deeply engrossed in a worn copy of The Hobbit he found buried at the back of one of the shelves one day when he had grown tired of his endless, fruitless research. It's a colder day, the clouds dark and dreary outside, threatening rain, and Harry is wrapped in a soft blue blanket that Bitsy summoned from his chambers. There's a cup of tea steaming on the table beside him. He's wrapped his hand around it and lifting it to his lips when he hears Riddle's harsh, accusing voice ring out in the silent room.

"What on *earth* are you doing?"

Harry jumps, making a startled sound and his hand slips, spilling some of the tea down his front. "Shit." He scrubs at his sweater with the edge of the blanket.

Riddle stalks closer, taking in Harry's set up with an incredulous gaze. His eyes linger on the blue blanket. His lips curl. "I asked you a question."

Harry peers up at him, feeling a sudden burst of annoyance. "What does it look like I'm doing, Tom?"

Riddle scowls. "You don't read."

Harry snorts derisively. If Riddle thinks he can ignore him for a month straight and then suddenly barge into his space, accusing him of illiteracy, then Harry's not going to waste time

arguing with him. He pulls the blanket tighter around his waist, going back to his spot in the book. He tries to resume his reading but Riddle's pale hand flashes into sight and snatches the book right out of his grasp.

Harry glares up at Riddle and then, realizing he's inadvertently made eye contact again, immediately lowers his gaze and scowls at his lap.

"Tolkien?" Riddle asks, a curious edge in his tone. Harry doesn't respond. "I know you don't like to read, husband. This is the first time I've seen you pick up a real book. What are you playing at?"

Harry shifts, feeling a mix of shame and anger course through his veins.

"Answer me."

Harry's blood boils. He throws the blanket off and stands up, squaring his shoulders and glaring at Riddle, who suddenly seems startled. "I've done everything you've asked," Harry says through gritted teeth. His face feels hot. "I've spent weeks in this bloody manor, sitting on my arse and being quiet, going to bed on time like a good little boy. I haven't done magic, I haven't snuck out, I haven't even set foot onto the grounds although Merlin knows I'd like to. This library is one of the only places I'm allowed inside. And I know I am—I've asked Bitsy."

Riddle stares at him.

Harry takes in a deep, shuddering breath. He feels warning bells ringing in his head, his knees already knocking, his mind warning him to shut up and sit down before he digs his own grave even deeper. But he's been set off, and now he's hard-pressed to keep quiet. "If I've done something wrong, if I've broken one of your rules or embarrassed you, just bloody tell me and I won't do it again. And if you still want to know what I'm *playing at*," Harry sneers, "I guess I'm just trying to give myself something to do so I don't go bloody insane and off myself. Is that alright with you, *husband*?"

Riddle takes a half step back.

Harry, still possessed by some kind of insane courage, stalks over and holds out his hand. "Right. I'd like the book back now, please." Riddle doesn't say anything, but he places the book in Harry's hand. Harry wraps his fingers around it tightly and leaves the library in a huff.

-

Later, when he's hunched over in the bathtub, shivering, recovering from what might be his worst nightmare yet, he thinks morosely that he's finally done it. He was doing so well. He could have kept his mouth shut. And now he's certain to have set Riddle off. He's practically asking for it. And he still doesn't have his wand, nor any other way to defend himself.

It doesn't seem like Riddle is a dark lord in this world, at least. But Harry doesn't know what that means. He doesn't know what the man will do to him, if he makes him angry enough. And he has nowhere to run to. Nobody to trust to stand by his side.

"Master Harry must breathe in and out," Bitsy orders him, patting his back and tugging at a strand of his hair reprovingly.

Harry takes in a shuddering breath and tries to do as she says. It is easier to breathe there, in the steamy bathroom, with the sweet scent of his hair products swirling in the air around them. "I think I'm in trouble," he finally mumbles, leaning his head back and allowing Bitsy to pour water over it.

"Master Harry is always being in trouble," she says with a shrug.

Harry swallows. "I was trying to be good," he says softly.

Bitsy pauses and regards him for a long time, seeming thoughtful. "Yes," she hums. "Master Harry *is* trying to be good. He is… not usually trying this hard."

Harry smiles miserably. "Well, I shouted at Riddle in the library yesterday morning. So I'm probably not allowed in there anymore."

Bitsy frowns. She seems about to reprimand him, but then thinks better of it. "Master Riddle is not saying anything to Bitsy of the sort," she says instead. "Master Harry is not forbidden from the library, as far as Bitsy is concerned."

Harry's shoulders slump with relief. "Okay. Thank you, Bitsy."

The rest of the bath is silent. Bitsy continues to hum and sing, washing Harry far longer than she needs to. Harry tries to soak in the conversation and physical comfort as much as he can. It's strange, because when he was a child, going weeks or even months without being spoken to or touched seemed normal. But now that he's older, now that he knows how it feels to be loved, to be embraced, it's much harder. Harry aches for a friend, for meaningful conversation, to be viewed as something other than a trophy husband. He would do anything to see Ron and Hermione one more time—to talk to them about what's happening.

But at least he has Bitsy. And Riddle won't take *her* away from him. Right?

***

The next time Harry dares to venture into the library, it's not empty like it normally is.

"Oh…" he says, stopping short when he sees Riddle seated at one of the oak desks, scribbling away at a bit of parchment. He glances up at Harry briefly.

"Morning."

"Er," Harry responds, eyeing his favorite armchair. It's closer to Riddle than he'd like. Why is Riddle here again, anyway? Nobody ever comes in here. Harry wavers by the doorway and thinks of what to do.

"I won't bite," Riddle says, now sounding irritated.

Harry swallows nervously and supposes there's no way around it. He forces himself to walk all the way into the room. He sits at his armchair and tucks his blanket around his feet, pulling out his book. He glances up surreptitiously at Riddle, but the man isn't paying him any attention. Harry tries to relax. He jumps when his usual hot cocoa and biscuits materialize on the table beside him. He tries to read, but he can't focus on the words on the page in front of him. The letters swim. He tries to pick up his hot cocoa, but his hand shakes too much, and his stomach is churning. He takes quick peeks up at Riddle as much as he can, trying to gauge his mood, but there is nothing he can pick up from the firm line of the man's mouth, his eyes shuttered and staring down at his stack of documents, and all Harry can really discern is that Riddle seems to be entirely uninterested in Harry at all.

This makes Harry feel a bit better. So he eventually stretches out a bit on the armchair, and curls his hands more tightly around the book, and forces his eyes to focus on the page. And sometime later, when he has finally begun to relax, and is feeling comfortable enough to take a sip of his hot cocoa, his hand wrapping around the thick mug and lifting it off the tray, Riddle decides to speak.

"You haven't," he says.

Harry jerks. The mug slips from his hand and lands on his lap. Hot cocoa splashes everywhere, soaking his sweater and pants and getting all over the blanket. Harry looks on with horror to see that even the book is ruined, and hot cocoa is seeping into the velvet fabric of the armchair. He jumps out of his seat and scrubs furiously at the stains.

"I— I didn't mean to," he says. "I'm sorry, I—" his voice breaks and starts to tremble. "I can fix it." Harry's breath comes out quicker and quicker, in sharp, jerky gasps, and he scrubs at

the seat so hard his palms start to burn. His vision tunnels and he can't hear or see, the odd ringing is back in his ears, and so he flinches again when he feels a hand grasp his shoulder.

"Harry," Tom says.

"I don't, I can't remember the cleaning spells but—I mean, if I had my wand, maybe," Harry begins to babble, wincing when Riddle's grip tightens minutely. "I mean, not that, of course I wouldn't—but it's alright, I can ask Bitsy for help. I'm—sorry I shouted at you yesterday. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. I need this library. I need these books. Can you just forget—"

Riddle takes both of Harry's hands in his, forcing him to hold still. "You need to calm down," he says, tone unreadable.

Harry nods his head jerkily. Calm down, he can do that. He just can't think about how angry Riddle must be, how he's going to punish him, take away his books or even make him hurt, lock him away in his chambers or maybe even in a cupboard, restrict his food or maybe torture him with the cruciatus—

Riddle grips both of Harry's shoulders now and shakes him lightly.

"Harry," he says. He sounds bewildered. "Breathe. I'm not… Merlin. You haven't done anything wrong—that's all I was trying to say. You aren't in trouble. I shouldn't have been so accusatory yesterday."

Harry's breathing evens out slightly at Riddle's words. He glances down at himself and begins to panic again. "But I ruined your book," he says. "I didn't mean to, I'm sorry—"

Riddle makes a frustrated sound. He takes out his wand, and Harry flinches. He curls inward, squeezing his eyes tightly shut. He waits for whatever painful spell Riddle is surely going to cast.

Riddle holds perfectly still for a beat, breathing in and out very calmly, his left hand still resting on Harry's shoulder. He sighs and then—he does wave his wand, and begin muttering spells under his breath but—when Harry dares to open his eyes, to look, all he sees are the hot cocoa stains disappearing from Harry's shirt, and the chair, and his blanket. All he hears is the book flopping around on the ground, pages fluttering wildly until it's restored to its original condition. And all he feels is the warmth of the blue blanket resettling back onto his shoulders.

"Did you think I was going to hurt you?" Riddle asks quietly, after he's put his wand away and Harry is staring at him with wide, glazed eyes. Harry tries to pull away, to put some space between them but Riddle's grip on his shoulder is too firm.

"No," Harry lies.

Riddle seems disturbed. "I don't understand. Have I *ever* hurt you, Harry?"

Harry pauses.

Yes, of course, he thinks in his head. *You killed my parents. You tried to kill me, and made me a horcrux instead. You chased after me my entire life trying to finish the job. You are the subject and source of all my nightmares.*

But that wasn't *this* Tom Riddle.

This Tom seems to be a perfectly normal man with perhaps larger than normal ambitions, but nothing that leans toward psychotic or murderous. (So far.)

But something in Harry's face must tell, must show something of the inner truth of Harry's feelings, because Riddle suddenly flinches. He releases his grip on Harry's shoulder. Harry immediately takes the opportunity and scrambles away from him, snatching his blanket from the floor and fleeing out of the library.

"Harry—" Riddle calls out, a strange tone to his voice, but Harry keeps moving and does not look back.

***

Harry doesn't go back to the library. He doesn't want to see Riddle. He's afraid that he's done something, that he gave something away and now Riddle knows the truth. He has plenty of books stashed away in his room that he needs to finish studying, anyway. And it seems that Riddle feels similarly, because Harry doesn't see him much anymore either except for the occasional meal.

And then one day Harry is sitting on his windowsill, a book on Quidditch forgotten on the bench beside him, when Bitsy appears with a pop beside him. Harry barely reacts.

His thoughts move slower these days. He eats less and less, and the worse his nightmares get, the less he sleeps. Most of his time is spent sprawled across his bed fighting exhaustion and nausea, or leafing aimlessly through a book, or getting scrubbed down in the bath by Bitsy. The days pass like weeks and Harry is hard-pressed to know what day of the week it is or what time of day or how long it has been since he faced Voldemort in the Forbidden Forest. Harry wants to figure out what has happened to him, how he ended up here, and he wants to get back to his own world, or—if not that, at least move on, truly, and see his parents, and be at peace, but he's growing tired of searching for answers and finding nothing.

"Hullo," he says to Bitsy.

“Master Harry,” she says. Her voice sounds odd to his ears. Strained, like she’s… worried. “Master Harry is going outside today. He must.”

Harry slowly turns his head to face her. “I’m… not allowed outside,” he says carefully.

Bitsy frowns. “Master Harry is permitted on the grounds, yes he is,” she insists. “Master Riddle is saying only to not go past the wards.” She smiles at him then, a little tremulous thing.

Harry doesn’t smile back. His gaze drifts over to the window. All of these weeks spent staring outside, wishing for freedom, and now he has it, and feels that he has no use for it. “Not now, Bitsy... I’m too tired,” he says.

Bitsy scowls at him and stamps her foot impatiently. “Master Harry is being ridiculous. He is wasting away,” she says. “He must be going outside in the sun for one hour or more. Master Riddle is saying that he must, and Master Riddle is the Lord of the house and he is Master Harry’s husband and Master Harry must do as he says.”

Harry feels the sudden urge to laugh. “Oh,” he says, his stomach twisting. “Alright. If Master Riddle says so.” He finally climbs down from the windowsill, his legs trembling, and Bitsy thrusts a wool jumper into his arms.

“Put it on,” she orders him. “Master Harry must not be catching a cold.”

“Yes ma’am,” Harry says, tugging the jumper over his head. Bitsy pulls him impatiently from his chambers, down the stairs and out onto the grounds.

-

Harry squints up at the sun. The breeze feels good, ruffling his hair and bringing some color to his cheeks. He takes in a deep breath and lets it out slowly. It’s colder than he expected. Harry tries to remember how the weather should be, but it's hard, with the way Tom’s wards keep the manor in a perpetual state of late summer with endless green grass and twittering birds and the trickling of water into ponds filled with lily pads and croaking frogs. He knows he arrived at the end of August. It can’t be later than October, he thinks, but he is afraid to ask.

Bitsy watches him approvingly. “Go,” she says, shooing him. “Master Harry must move and get his blood and lungs pumping.”

“Where’s my leash, then?” Harry jokes weakly, and Bitsy scowls at him.

“Master Harry should not tempt Bitsy,” she warns. She snaps her fingers and a soft cap appears on Harry’s head, along with a green scarf and a pair of thin gloves.

Harry turns obediently away from Bitsy and stumbles along the path.

The grounds are almost overwhelmingly large. It was different, walking around in them rather than looking down from the window. And Harry hadn’t quite realized how out of shape he was. Only a few minutes of walking slowly along the stone path have him wheezing for air and feeling faint. He stumbles to a stop beside one of the stone statues, trying to catch his breath.

“Master Harry must keep moving,” he hears Bitsy call out from the near distance. Without looking, he flashes a crude gesture at her and smirks when he hears her insulted shriek. He gives himself a few more moments of rest, and then keeps moving. He imagines that if he walks far enough, he’ll walk out of sight of Bitsy, and perhaps even of Riddle, who he has the strangest feeling is also watching him from somewhere. Harry itches to run, to climb, to hop on a broom and fly above the glittering lake he reaches at the edge of the property. He can just barely see the shimmering bits of air that indicate where the wards begin. Instead he heaves a sigh and, looking warily over his shoulder, sits down at the edge of the lake. His reflection ripples over the lake and looks back at him.

Harry wonders how much longer this is going to go on for.

He’s starting to remember, in bits and pieces, what happened after Voldemort killed him. His conversation in King’s Cross with Dumbledore, and the choice. To go on, or to return back. He was supposed to go on. That had been his choice. He remembers boarding the train and waving goodbye to Dumbledore, who had looked on with strangely sad eyes. Harry remembers feeling confused. Why had Dumbledore been sad? Harry was getting to move on. He was going to see his parents, and Professor Lupin, and Sirius. He wasn’t going to fight anymore, or watch any of his friends die for him.

So how did he end up here?

Harry spends a long time outside. The grass is warm and slightly damp and he lies down with a pleased huff. He can’t see Bitsy in the distance anymore. He thinks maybe she went inside to prepare lunch. (Or maybe dinner. His perception of time has gotten quite skewed, and since he doesn’t eat much anymore, it doesn’t seem to be important to know what time it is anyway.)

Harry falls asleep like that, stretched out on the grass with an arm flung over his face to block the fading sunlight.

And then— he wakes in his room sometime later, when the sun has gone fully down and from his window he can see stars. Harry yawns and stretches on his bed. There’s a cup of herbal tea on his bedside table gone cold, and a plate of apple slices. He considers the food and then picks up one slice, chewing it slowly and idly wondering how he got back into his room. He climbs out of his bed after a while and pads over to the window. The grounds look different at night—especially now that Harry has walked among them on his feet. He knows

how the grass feels. He knows how cool the water of the lake is when you drag your fingers through it.

His eyes can just find the glimmering edge of the wards. His heart twists slightly, and the brightness in his eyes dims.

Chapter 5: 5

Chapter Summary

Harry goes to a party and runs into some old friends.

Chapter Notes

Additional tw/summaries in the endnote!
minor edits 1/7

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I'm going to give you a chance," Riddle says.

It's a few days later and Harry is reading out in the garden, his bare feet resting on the grass and his shirt unbuttoned enough to let the sun warm his chest. He's not sure at what point Riddle joined him. The man is standing uncomfortably close to Harry, eyeing his book curiously like he's still unsure Harry actually enjoys reading. Harry rolls his eyes. He adjusts his grip on the book (*Wuthering Heights* now) and ignores him.

"Harry," Riddle says. "Did you hear me?"

Harry sighs. He looks up at Riddle but carefully avoids his eye. "Yes."

Riddle sighs, too. He shifts from one foot to the other. "There is a ministry-sponsored event this weekend," he says.

"Okay?"

Riddle's face colours. "I'd—like you to accompany me. It's been… quite some time since you made a public appearance. People are starting to ask questions."

Harry smiles wryly. "I thought we agreed that I wasn't permitted to leave the manor." His gaze drifts back down to his book.

The sun feels so very nice and warm on his skin. The grass is soft, too, and he knows he should take advantage of this nice weather before he gets locked inside again for one thing or another. He's halfway through the book now. This is a morbid one—he wonders why Bitsy recommended it. She usually only gives him books she thinks will make him happier.

"Harry," Riddle says again, sounding exasperated. "Are you listening to me?"

Harry looks back up at Riddle. “Of course,” he says.

“Bitsy will help you get ready,” Riddle finally says, after regarding Harry for a long time through unreadable eyes. “Two evenings from now. I want you to attend the event with me, at my side, as my husband. I’ll expect you to behave yourself, and not do anything that will reflect poorly on me or on your parents. Can you do that?”

Harry’s throat tightens. He tries to force his reaction down. Once again, relegated to a toy. A pet. Something to look pretty and to keep quiet and to behave. “Do I even have a choice?”

Riddle’s gaze darkens and his lip curls slightly. “No.”

Harry scowls mutinously down at the grass.

“But if it goes well,” Riddle adds, “I will of course consider… expanding certain freedoms. Allowing you more privileges.”

Harry laughs. “Oh, that’s great. Suppose I do a couple of tricks? If I sit at your heel and lick your palm? What will I get then?”

Riddle’s face contorts with a sudden fury and Harry’s smirk falls away. He shifts uncomfortably in the lawn chair. Riddle must see it because he takes in a slow breath and squares his shoulders.

“You’re trying to provoke me again. Why? Do you think you will get me to lose control? To hurt you?” He steps closer to Harry. “That has never worked, you know.”

Harry stiffens. He glowers at Riddle. “No. I’m not afraid of you.”

“I think you are.”

Harry drops his book in the grass. He grips the edges of his seat and makes to get up, but Riddle presses down on his shoulder.

“Let me up,” Harry says, his voice quiet and terse.

“Why won’t you look at me anymore?” Riddle murmurs. He kneels on the grass in front of Harry, between Harry’s knees. Harry shudders and looks away.

“Don’t,” he says, his throat aching, the buzzing in his ears picking up.

“I know that you didn’t exactly want this marriage,” Riddle says, his tone going soft. “I didn’t either, of course. We both had vastly different reasons for doing it. I know that you don’t care for me, nor I you. And I know that things… haven’t quite turned out the way you expected.”

This is all news to Harry. He keeps his gaze lowered and shrugs.

“But as of late you’ve been acting… strange,” Riddle pauses. “You haven’t seemed… like yourself.”

Harry shudders. *I'm not him,* he wants to scream. *I'm not the other Harry. You don't know me.* "I don't know what you mean," he says instead. He finds himself dejected to think that it's taken Riddle this long to take any notice that his husband is not the same man he was a little over a month ago. He supposes that Riddle must have not known the other Harry, either. Not really.

Riddle seems frustrated again. "I think you do."

Harry doesn't know what to say. He likes it better when the days and weeks stretch on in silence, when he gets ignored by his parents and patronized by Riddle. When he doesn't have to think and talk and try to act normal.

"I have done everything you asked," he finally says, speaking slowly and carefully. "You, and my… parents. And Bitsy. I'm trying to be… a good husband. I don't— I don't know what else you want from me. I'll go to the party, alright? And I'll stand by your side and— I'll smile and look… pretty. I'll pretend to be happy."

Riddle makes an odd noise, and his hands tighten briefly around Harry's shoulders.

"So is that all?" Harry asks. "If I do that, is it enough? Will you be satisfied?"

Riddle stares at him. His mouth twists and he seems on the verge of saying something, but then he just frowns. "Of course."

***

Harry has never been to a party of this scale.

The closest comparison he has in his head is the Christmas party Slughorn threw in their sixth year, or maybe Bill and Fleur's wedding. It certainly isn't his scene—too much elbow-rubbing and sneaky politics—but it seems like something that the old Harry would have been quite familiar with, so he does his best to project confidence.

The more unfamiliar faces he sees, the more overwhelmed he feels, and so Harry finds himself sticking as close to Riddle as possible. There's flashing cameras everywhere, and waiters walking by with hors d'oeuvres and champagne, and countless politicians that crowd around them both, shaking Riddle's hand and looking Harry up and down with hungry eyes. Harry had quite liked the robes that Bitsy dressed him in. They're soft, and forest green, and

open at the front to show his white dress shirt and fitted trousers. He had felt handsome, checking himself in the mirror before they left.

Now, he just feels like a piece of meat.

He's beginning to understand why this marriage happened in the first place. It seems to have been a way for Riddle to make more connections, to insert himself alongside one of the wealthiest families in Wizarding Britain. And on Harry's part—it was clearly meant to provide more control, to lock him down, to force him to behave and cultivate a classy image for the Potter line. To get him out of the papers and standing compliantly at Riddle's side, smiling and shaking hands and blushing prettily after each inappropriate comment and brush of someone's hand along his arse.

The more Harry comes to understand, the more sick it makes him feel.

He hadn't even really had the time to think about marriage in his past life, about growing up and having a family, and—now he finds himself entrenched in some sort of marriage of convenience with a man who clearly does not feel an ounce of love, respect or trust for Harry.

Harry had thought, once or twice (in the vague sort of way a teenage boy thinks about these things), that maybe one day he could marry Ginny, and they could have a ridiculously large family of their own, with enough children to form a quidditch team. And the assumption that whoever he married, Ginny or not, that his home would be a happy one, that he would be able to create an environment where he felt safe, where he didn't have to think about the war, or the Dursleys, and he could just—exist, and be happy, and be loved—

Well, Harry had thought that would go without saying.

-

Lost in thought, Harry doesn't realise that he's tensing up, that the expression of bland happiness has dropped from his face until Riddle squeezes his arm lightly, shooting him a warning look.

"Sorry," Harry says. He swallows and tries to relax. He works on emptying his mind.

It's gotten a bit easier now that he's been studying Occlumency in earnest. He pictures the soft feel of the grass beneath his feet, the warm sun, the cool breeze. He imagines how it would feel to ride on his broom again. Nothing but the wind rushing in his ears and the ground below him. No one touching him, no disapproving gaze, no flash of cameras and no nausea rolling in his gut. Just quiet, calm, and safe. He's unsure how much time passes before he hears Riddle muttering something else in his ear.

“What?” Harry mumbles, and Riddle’s eyes flash warningly.

“I said, wait right here, darling,” he says, sounding annoyed. Harry wonders if Riddle is as miserable as Harry is, being stuck here with a fake smile plastered on his face. “I must speak with Bulgaria’s minister for magic. I’ll bring you back something from the dessert table, shall I?”

Harry fights back the urge to vomit. “Right,” he murmurs sardonically, forcing a smile onto his face. “I’ll be right here, eagerly awaiting your return, dear husband. I expect treacle tart.”

A muscle in Riddle’s jaw twitches. He looks around the room but the crowd seems to have dissipated for the moment. So he looks back to Harry and lets some hardness leak into his voice.

“Just a few moments,” he says. “Behave, would you?”

Harry rolls his eyes. He can’t drink, or talk to anyone, or go off on his own. He doesn’t even have his wand. There’s no one here that he recognizes, and he doesn’t know how to dance, anyway. What does Riddle think is going to happen? So Harry, not feeling particularly friendly, doesn’t respond. Riddle scoffs in frustration, stalking off with a whirl of his formal robes.

Harry shuffles backward until he’s leant against one of the stone columns that support the ceiling. He can see most of the room from here. A few photographers linger, but most seem to have gotten their fill of photos of him and have moved on to other more entertaining subjects. He waits, and waits, and then five minutes have passed, and then ten, and then thirty.

Riddle is on the complete opposite side of the room, an easy grin on his face, surrounded by a bunch of important-looking men with very punchable faces. He says something and the entire group laughs.

Harry rolls his eyes and yawns. He shuffles his feet. He considers sitting down, but he’s quite certain that wouldn’t look well in the papers. And he doesn’t want Riddle to come back to find him curled up on the ground like a child who’s been left behind at the supermarket.

Fucking Riddle. And now Harry’s craving treacle tart. He cranes his neck, trying to spot the buffet table. Maybe he could quickly slip over, avoid the press and any other awkward conversations, grab some dessert and come back before his stupid husband notices a thing. Harry is about to do just that when a coldly familiar voice rings out beside him.

“You’ve been benched for the night, I see.”

Harry feels his face go white. He whirls around, gaping at the horrifyingly familiar head of pale blond hair.

“Oh, calm down,” Malfoy rolls his eyes. “You won’t get in trouble just for talking with me, will you? And the press are all distracted by your husband.” Malfoy sneers at the word.

Harry continues staring at him. He feels as if his brain has short-circuited. The blond boy laughs after a moment and steps closer, pulling Harry into—a *hug?*

"It's been far too long, cousin," Malfoy hums, patting Harry on the back and then looking him over. "You've lost weight, you bastard. You think you look better than me now? You'll have to try harder than that to get on the cover of Witch Weekly." He laughs again, a high, nasally thing, and Harry feels uneasy. He tries to disentangle himself from Malfoy and step back, but Malfoy stays close.

"Can't believe how long he's kept you locked up this time. Your parents were never this bad. Haven't you made up yet? I thought it was easy. Just get him into bed and do whatever he wants. Or are you playing hard to get this time? Trying to get something out of him? You want to wait until he begs for it?"

"Shut up," Harry snarls. He shoves Malfoy away and the boy stumbles slightly. His smirk drops for a moment and then he chuckles with glee.

"*There* he is. I thought you'd finally gotten boring. Come on then, let's have some fun. Theo wants to see you." Malfoy waggles his eyebrows.

Theo? Harry faintly remembers the tall, quiet boy from Slytherin house. Theodore Nott. Why would he want to see Harry? Are they friends in this world?

While Harry is distracted, Malfoy grabs him around the waist and starts to tow him out of the room.

"Wait, er, I'm not—" Harry protests. "Malfoy, I'm supposed to stay there. Riddle said—I promised him—"

"He can bugger off," Malfoy snorts. "Bossy prick. Thinks he can tell you what to do. You're Harry bloody Potter, for fuck's sake."

"But, Malfoy, just—let go. Wait just wait a minute—"

"C'mon, don't tell me you're going to just do as he says all of a sudden. Going to roll over too? Going to take it right up the arse?"

Harry gasps in shock, speechless, his face coloring a deep red.

Malfoy smiles devilishly at him. "But then, that's just how you like it, isn't it?"

Harry thinks faintly that he could have gone without learning that particular bit of information about the other Harry's sexual preferences. He scowls at Malfoy, struggling to get away but he's been taken completely by surprise and his thoughts are reeling too quickly to do much aside from go along with whatever scheme he's been mixed up in with the other boy. He is still not back to his full strength, after all, and he hasn't eaten much of anything beside the plate of biscuits Bitsy left for him this morning. His heart is pounding and his hands shaking.

If he causes a scene, everyone will look over and the reporters will take photos. Riddle will know that he left his spot and he disobeyed. Then his parents will find out, and Harry will be in even more trouble. But— Harry thinks that if he just goes quietly with Malfoy now, then he can chat with Theo and get it over with and then go back to the party.

Right?

And—if Malfoy's really his cousin in this world, if he wants to have fun, then—maybe this is good. Harry could certainly do with a friend (although he wishes the pickings weren't so very slim). He thinks it might be nice to have some normal conversation, to spend time with someone besides his controlling husband and their house elf. Maybe he'll be able to find out some more information on the old Harry's life, and what sorts of things he was doing to make Riddle hate him so dearly.

Malfoy drags him out of the large ballroom and down a long hallway, passing doors left and right until they come to a shadowy, secluded alcove. Malfoy shoves Harry slightly until he stumbles forward into the darkness.

"There you go," Malfoy says. "One express delivery of Harry Potter. Make it count, you two. I'll keep watch, at least until I get bored. You owe me."

"What—" Harry starts, confused, and then he realises.There's someone else there in the alcove, waiting, and they catch Harry before he stumbles into the wall. Strong arms come up around him and wrap tightly around his waist and—

"*Harry.*"

"Er," Harry says with a whisper. He feels an odd, tingling apprehension. "Theo?"

Theodore Nott groans. He turns Harry, pressing him hard into the corner of the alcove. Harry freezes.

"Fuuck, I've missed you," Theo murmurs against Harry's skin, dragging his lips along the column of his neck. The man smells like vodka, and sex, and something else that makes the hair on the back of Harry's neck stand up.

"Wait," he says, stunned, but Theo doesn't seem to hear. He presses Harry even harder into the wall and shoves his leg between Harry's thighs, pressing in and up until Harry gasps.

"I knew you'd missed me," Theo says, his grin barely visible in the shadowy alcove.

"No—" Harry shudders when Theo buries his head in the crook of his neck, sucking hard enough at his skin to leave a bruise. Harry gasps again and shivers.

"Stop it," he says. "Get off me. I don't want this." He tries to push the other boy away, to get out of the alcove and back to the party, but Theo takes both of his wrists in a bruising grip and presses them to the wall above his head.

"You're still playing hard to get, hm?" Theo says with a low groan in his ear. He presses in closer to Harry and starts to grind against him. Harry can't get his arms free. He can't move.

He has never been touched like this before, and he doesn't know what to do. The sensations are overwhelming. He closes his eyes tightly shut and thinks maybe if he holds perfectly still, if he plays along, maybe Theo will take what he wants and then he'll be done, and he'll leave Harry alone, and then Harry can still salvage the situation. He can get back to Riddle in time and pretend like nothing happened.

"God, It's been bloody *months*," Theo growls, his grip on Harry's wrists tightening painfully. Harry makes a sound of protest. "Months I haven't been able to see you. To *fuck* you. You've been a bad boy, haven't you? I saw you in the papers, getting into trouble like always. My little whore."

Harry flinches.

"Bloody insatiable, aren't you?" Theo goes on. He licks into Harry's mouth and then kisses him hard, until Harry can't breathe, and he's shuddering against the wall, his vision flickering. Only then does Theo let him come up for air.

"No, I'm— I don't—I promised Riddle I wouldn't. Let go of me. I want to go back to the party—"

Theo laughs and wraps his free hand around Harry's neck. He squeezes. "I love when we roleplay," he groans in Harry's ear. Harry's mouth opens and closes soundlessly, his eyes rolling back and his wrists twist uselessly in Theo's grip.

Then—from somewhere behind them there is a swirl of fabric, and—

A bright flash of light, and—

The sound of a shutter clicking.

At the same time, Theo falters, and then—there's someone else there in the alcove with them, gripping Harry by the back of his robes and hauling him bodily away. Harry experiences a brief moment of relief before he turns and makes eye contact with his savior.

Riddle's face is white with fury. Harry flinches back, reeling, struggling to center his feet beneath his body. Riddle lets go of his robes but then grabs the crook of his elbow instead.

"No," Harry croaks. "I didn't—it wasn't—! I can explain—"

He looks wildly around for Malfoy, for anyone who might have witnessed the entire thing, who might be able to vouch for Harry's innocence. But the corridor is empty, and Malfoy is nowhere in sight. Harry's heart drops.

"Silence," Riddle hisses. He stalks through the corridor, towing Harry beside him. Harry is vaguely aware, the closer they get to the ballroom, of whispering murmurs around them, the flashing of more cameras, and scandalized eyes tracking their movements. Harry struggles to keep up with Riddle's unforgiving pace. He trips over his feet a few times, and Riddle yanks him onward, not allowing them to slow even for a moment. Harry thinks faintly that his arm might bruise.

They take the floo. Riddle shoves Harry in first and Harry is still stumbling onto the carpet of the main hall of the manor, choking on ash, when Riddle steps in behind him. Harry inhales sharply and struggles to his feet, backing away as Riddle advances on him, his features contorted in a vicious snarl.

“Wait,” Harry says, desperate.

“You planned that, didn’t you?” Riddle says darkly. He comes closer. And Harry finds himself, for the second time in one night, backed up into a wall.

“I didn’t—no, I would never,” he pleads. He can’t breathe right, his heart is stuttering and his words are jumbled. He can’t even be sure of everything that just happened.

“You thought to make a fool of me. Again.” Riddle grabs the front of Harry’s robe and hauls him close, until they’re eye to eye, noses nearly touching.

“No Tom, I didn’t, I wouldn’t,” Harry says, stumbling over his words, his breath hitching and eyes wide.

Riddle falters then, only for a moment, but the rage quickly returns. “If you think you’ve finally ruined me with this, you’re stupider than you look,” he hisses, and Harry flinches. “This is nothing. The Prophet will report on it for a few days and then move on. You however,” his tone darkens, “will still be reaping the consequences of your actions for the foreseeable future.”

Riddle drops his grip on Harry’s robes and storms out of the room.

Harry sinks down to his knees. He buries his face in his hands. He doesn’t know how long he stays like that, shoulders trembling, air coming in through sharp, panicked bursts.

Bitsy pops into existence beside him.

“Master Harry,” she says, sounding guarded again, just like the first day Harry met her. He shudders.

“Please,” he whispers. “Don’t say it. I know.”

“Master Riddle is being very angry,” Bitsy remarks. She kneels beside Harry on the floor.

“Yeah,” Harry says. He scrubs his eyes and looks at the house elf. She seems confused.

“Bitsy is thinking… that Master Harry is being a good husband now,” she says slowly.

Harry shrugs with a choked laugh. “I thought so too.”

Bitsy cocks her head at him. She seems unsure of what to say, but then she curls her arm around his waist and hoists him back up to his feet. “Master Harry is having his bath now,” she says decisively.

Harry closes his eyes with relief. So, there is at least one thing that Riddle will still allow him. This one small comfort. Whatever he takes in the morning, whatever he does with Harry, whatever Harry's punishment will be, at least he has this moment now, tucked away in his chambers in the warm bath with the quiet, rough sound of Bitsy singing, the sponge trailing warm, sparkling bubbles all along his skin.

-

The bath doesn't solve everything. It never does, of course, but Harry had hoped it would wash away the tingling, burning feeling of Theo's hands and lips all over his skin. But Bitsy just *isn't—scrubbing—hard—enough.* So when she's done, Harry takes the sponge himself and works at the irritated spots on his neck, and his chest, his hips and his inner thighs. He scrubs as hard as he can but it only makes the skin pink, and irritated, raw, and it doesn't make him feel any better.

"Master Harry is clean enough," Bitsy says, alarmed. She tries to take the sponge away.

"No, I'm not," Harry says thickly under his breath, fighting back tears, still scrubbing punishingly "I can still—feel—"

Bitsy snaps her fingers with a muttered oath and the sponge disappears.

Harry feels wetness on his cheeks, and he knows he's beginning to cry, which he's not supposed to be doing. He's supposed to control himself. He's supposed to keep everything locked deep down, where it won't affect him, where he can be the Boy-Who-Lived and the Boy-Who-Died and Voldemort's nemesis and now Tom Riddle's husband and Lily and James Potter's son and Draco's cousin and *Theo's —*

"Fuck," Harry rasps, and then dissolves into sobs.

Bitsy is startled. "Master Harry," she says. She tries to help him out of the bath but he shoves her arm off.

"Don't touch me," he gasps. "I'm still—still dirty, I need to get it off, I can still feel it, he's—his hands, everywhere, and—he's so angry, I can't, I can't—"

Bitsy snaps her fingers and a potion vial comes sailing into the room. She uncorks it and grips Harry around the neck, pouring the entire contents into his mouth.Harry, who had not been expecting that at all, falls into a stunned silence. An immediate, smothering calm descends over him, quieting his panicked thoughts and making him feel pleasantly fuzzy.

"Oh," he mumbles.

Bitsy helps him up out of the tepid bathwater and wraps him in a warm robe. She seems uneasy and keeps darting her eyes up at him, like she's waiting for him to freak out again.

"Master Harry is still being forbidden from mind-altering substances," she says, sounding hesitant. "But Bitsy is allowing it… just this once."

She guides Harry back into the bedroom, supervising while Harry puts on his pajamas and climbs into the bed.

"G'night," Harry mumbles, smiling softly at her when she tucks the sheets in closer around his waist.

Bitsy seems like she is trying to smile back, but she mostly just appears very concerned. "Rest now, Master Harry," she says firmly. "Everything is being alright."

Chapter End Notes

tws:
-non-consensual touching/kissing between Harry/Theodore Nott
-light self-harm
-light non-consensual drug use

Quick summary: Nott makes sexual advances and touches that are unwelcome, and he ignores Harry's requests to stop. Harry hurts himself in the bathroom afterward trying to clean off the feel of being touched. Bitsy gives Harry a calming draught without specifically asking if he wants it or telling him what she's doing. (it's implied that the other Harry was pretty familiar with using these kinds of potions and likely wouldn't have objected.)

thank you so so much for all of the kind comments and kudos! I am still working through responding to them all but I do read them and they make my day every single time <3 I have a rough chapter count now, and will be continuing with frequent updates!

Chapter 6: 6

Chapter Summary

the one where Harry asks for help and gets something much worse.

Chapter Notes

drops this chapter and flees screaming into the distance

additional tws in the endnote for this specific chapter, and tags for the fic overall have been updated. Please check them out if you need to. Some real comfort for Harry coming next chapter, I promise !!!
minor edits 9/02

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The very next morning, the door to the library is locked.

Harry isn't really surprised, although he couldn't stop the small sliver of hope that last night didn't happen, that Theodore Nott didn't touch him in that dark alcove and Riddle didn't drag him home afterward and scold him like a misbehaving dog. He trudges slowly back to his chambers. Breakfast comes and goes, and lunch, and then dinner. Harry lays in his bed. Bitsy sends him a tray for each meal, but his bedside table is too far and Harry is too numb. He's not hungry.

"Perhaps, if Master Harry is just talking to Master Riddle? If he is telling Master Riddle he is sorry, that he is making a mistake and he is not doing it again, maybe Master Riddle is being happy with him," Bitsy tries to reason with him that night, her face threaded with worry, and Harry rolls onto his side facing away from her on the bed.

"No," he says quietly. "I don't think that's a good idea, Bitsy. He's too angry. I don't think he would care to hear any sort of apology right now. And…" Harry hesitates. He squeezes his eyes shut. "I understand, with… with the things I've done. With the kind of husband I've been, I understand why he doesn't trust me. I know his job is very important, his image, and I've clearly tried very hard to destroy that in the past. I've made his life difficult." Harry takes a slow breath. "No, I think I'll give him some time to… calm down. I'll stay out of his way. I'll show him that I've changed, that I'm not like that anymore, and that I can be better than I was before."

Bitsy seems frustrated, but she doesn't press. She merely scoots the tray of food closer to him, her lips pressed tightly together, giving him a sharp look. Harry picks up one of the crisps and puts it in his mouth, chewing carefully. Slightly mollified, then, Bitsy tells Harry to call if he needs her during the night, and then she disapparates from the room.

Harry pushes the tray of food away after she's gone. The smell of tea is making him nauseous.

He thinks about what else Riddle could take away. He might lock the doors to Harry's chambers so he can't get out. Or maybe he'll move Harry into somewhere smaller, less obtrusive, like a cupboard. Harry found one on the top floor that would work, in his early days of exploring the manor. It's like the one the Dursleys kept him in throughout his childhood. Harry could handle that.

He takes all of his research books from the shelf and hides them beneath his bed, under a loose floorboard, along with some of the biscuits that Bitsy had sent up with his dinner.

(Just in case.)

-

And then late the next morning, the second day following the party, he sits up in bed and Riddle is sitting in the armchair near the window. Harry's mouth goes dry.

Riddle looks at him coldly. "Your parents have requested you for dinner this evening," he says.

"Oh," Harry says, his eyes wide and his voice hoarse. He wipes his sweating palms on his dressing gown. This is the first time he's seen or spoken with Riddle since the party, and he's not quite sure how to act. "What… what time should I come down?"

"You'll be going to dine with them *alone,"* Riddle specifies. "At your home. Potter Manor. They don't want me there."

Harry stares at Riddle. He can't tell if the man is pleased or disappointed by this turn of events. He wonders if he should take a chance now, to try and explain what really happened with Malfoy and Nott, but—Riddle still seems so angry. He can hardly look at Harry, and—Harry doesn't know if it's the right time. He doesn't want Riddle to think that he's trying to weasel out of the dinner with his parents. Harry's sure they want to scold him, to lecture him about the picture, and so Harry might as well get it over with now. And maybe after, he will try to talk to Riddle again. He'll try to explain. If Harry is honest, and if he speaks clearly, then surely Riddle will listen? Surely he will at least give Harry a chance?

“Alright,” he finally says. He clears his throat. “Erm, how will I get there? I don’t—”

“Use the floo,” Riddle says, shooting him an exasperated look. He stands up and brushes invisible lint from his robes. “Seven sharp. And for Merlin’s sake, don’t be late. You’ve caused me enough problems.”

***

Potter manor is far grander than Riddle’s estate. Almost distastefully so. Harry swirls in through the floo a few minutes before seven and tries his best to clean the ash off his robes before looking around.

So this is where the other Harry grew up?

Harry wonders what it would be like to grow up in a place like this. A nice home, extravagant, really, never lacking for want of food or shelter— *wouldn’t it have been nice?* He looks longingly toward a grand, winding staircase, which he imagines might lead up to his old bedroom. (The other Harry’s old bedroom, he reminds himself.) He wants to go up there, to see what it looks like, what sorts of things the other Harry surrounded himself with —did he have stuffed animals and toys, books, crayons and colouring pencils like Dudley did? Did he get to choose the colour of his bedspread and the paint on his walls?

Did his door have a lock that latched from the inside, instead of the outside?

Did he have friends? Did he get to have them over for sleepovers, and parties, and study groups, and—but that line of thought quickly makes Harry think of Malfoy, and then Nott, and his stomach flips. He focuses on locating his parents before he gets himself in trouble again.

-

When Harry finally stumbles into the dining room his father and mother are already seated, their eyes fixed on him. Harry pauses, steels himself, and then carefully walks over.

There is a copy of the Daily Prophet on the table. Harry doesn't want to look at it, but finds his eyes sliding across the front cover unwillingly. He cringes. In the photo, Theo has Harry pressed against the wall, one knee between his legs, and his hand wrapped around Harry's throat. Harry's head is thrown back in what looks like ecstasy, the veins in his arms pulsing, his eyes rolling back seemingly with pleasure.

Harry feels like he might throw up all over the expensive china.

"Sit down, dear," his mother says quietly when he's been staring at the photo for too long. "We have a lot to discuss."

Harry tries to smile at her. He nods, sits down, and picks up his fork, but he's too anxious to get anything down. He plays with his food instead, moving it around the plate and squirming in his seat. Each time he glances up, his father is staring at him with cold, hard eyes. Harry grimaces and looks down.

Some time later, the plates disappear from the table and an old, gnarly looking house elf appears and fills Harry's mother's wine glass with an ancient looking red wine.

"So?" James Potter says after they've sat in uncomfortable silence for a few minutes. "Do you have anything to say for yourself, son?"

Harry swallows thickly and nods. "Yeah. I'm, er. I'm—" he tries to say the words, to get his lips to form the phrase 'I'm sorry,' but at the last moment an odd, hopeful feeling twists in his gut.

"Yes?" his mother presses. She seems annoyed.

Harry squares his shoulders. He ignores every screaming instinct telling him that he's making a mistake. He has to give this a try, at least once, even if it won't work. And—they're his parents, aren't they? That has to count for *something.* They have to feel something for him, even if it is not exactly love. Don't they?

"Get on with it," his father says coldly, and Harry ducks his head.

"The papers, they got it wrong. I wasn't… I mean, I know how it looks, but that wasn't the whole story. I didn't want to do it. I didn't want him to touch me, and I didn't want to do—whatever he was trying to do. I said no, I tried to push him away but he wouldn't stop, and then…" Harry's voice starts to shake and he pauses for a moment. He keeps his eyes trained on the table. "I know that Theo and I have a… history, and that maybe you have no reason to trust me. But please, I've been… I'm really done with him, I am. I don't do stuff like that anymore. I was trying to be good. I promised Riddle I would be good."

His mother makes a muted sound, sort of like she is stifling a derisive laugh, and Harry flushes. He keeps his eyes lowered and clenches his hands into fists. "If you had been there,

if you had seen, you would understand. But no one was except Malfoy, and I don't know where he ran off to."

"How convenient," his mother says.

Harry grits his teeth and forces himself to continue. "I know it's hard to believe. I do. But please, I just— I don't know what to do. Tom is so angry. I tried to explain, but he wouldn't listen." He finally looks up at his parents, who are staring back at him with unreadable expressions. "Please, I need… I think I need help. Could you talk to him?"

The room falls into a painful silence.

His mother is the first to respond. "Oh, goodness," is all she says. She seems faintly amused.

His father, on the other hand, is furious. "You stupid, lying, spoiled brat," he spits out.

Harry feels his face go white and he jerks back in his seat, looking up at his father with wide eyes. "What? I didn't— I'm not—"

"I gave you a chance to apologize, and instead you choose to lie?"

"Lie?!" Harry feels his face grow hot. "It's the truth—"

"Did you really think we would believe that drivel?" Harry's father shakes his head, his lip curling with disdain. "You're not a child anymore. The decisions that you make have consequences. You can cry all you want, you can try to deny it, to make up excuses, and— your fool of a husband may have fallen for that little act, but I certainly won't. And I won't allow you to subject your mother to such madness."

"No, it's not—" Harry chokes out with difficulty, his mind still spinning around the words his father had used to describe him. "I'm not lying! I wouldn't have… please, mum, dad. If you would just listen to me—" Harry's voice cracks. "If *anyone* would listen! I know the photo looks bad, but that wasn't—I didn't know he would—"

"I think that's quite enough," his father sneers, taking out his wand and pointing it right at Harry's face. " *Oscausi.* "

Harry feels an odd, burning, tingling sensation around his lips. He reaches a trembling hand up, touching the spot on his face where his mouth should be, and the skin is perfectly smooth and seamless. Horrified tears fill his eyes. He didn't even know a spell like that existed. His mind fills with static, his face numb, and he stares at his father with wide eyes, not wanting to believe what is actually happening—what his father has done to him and only because Harry was trying to be honest. He had been trying to ask for help.

"Come here," his father says, pointing to the floor beside his seat.

Harry doesn't know what else to do. He follows instructions, stumbling to the other side of the table and kneeling obediently before his father.

"Remove your robes," his father says.

Harry unbuttons the fabric with shaking hands and pushes it off his shoulders. He flashes wildly through different possible scenarios of what might happen next. Uncle Vernon used to give him the belt, sometimes. If he was really bad. Maybe his father is going to do that. Harry can take a few lashes. It will hurt, but then it will be over. And once he takes his punishment, they won't be so angry with him anymore.

"Your shirt as well," his father orders. Harry starts to shiver. Lashes from leather on bare skin take much longer to heal, but if that's what his father needs to do, then Harry will take it. He can show them how good he can be.

"James," his mother cuts in suddenly, and Harry goes rigid with hope. Maybe—?

"I'm quite busy, dear," his father responds.

"Do try not to get blood all over the place again? It took ages to come out last time."

Harry's blood turns to ice in his veins.

"We'll see," his father muses. "Now then, Harry. I asked you to remove your shirt."

Harry scrambles to finish undressing with shaking hands. Once his bare skin is exposed to the room and he looks up at his father with wide eyes, pleading, begging for forgiveness. His father tuts disapprovingly. He leans over and buries his hand in Harry's curls, yanking his head back hard until Harry makes a rough, pained sound deep in his throat. His father smiles. He traces his thumb along Harry's neck and presses into a sensitive spot.

"My son," he murmurs. "The whore." He pushes his thumb harder into the fading hickey from Theo until Harry's eyes water. "Why do you have to be so disobedient? Do you like to be punished? Does it excite you?"

Harry closes his eyes when his father leans in close. There's a ghost of breath over his cheeks, his mouth, and his chest. Then a heavy hand wraps around his throat, matching the marks that Theo left just a few days prior.

"Was it worth it?" his father whispers cruelly. "Did you get your little cock wet, at least? Did you have enough time to turn over and let Nott fuck you, hm? Right up against the wall, little cunt that you are?"

Harry jerks with fright and shame, his cheeks reddening, and his eyes darting about frantically. He tries to shake his head no, but the grip on his neck is too tight.

This isn't his father. No—the real James Potter would never touch him like this. Would *never* treat him this way.

"No?" his father says, breathing out a dark laugh. "Caught by your husband just in time, I suppose. I guess there's one thing he's good for."

Harry closes his eyes again. He can't believe what he's hearing. This isn't real. It's not. It's all in his head. He's still at King's Cross. He's going to take his train, and he's going to move on. He's not going to have to fight anymore.

His father tightens his grip on Harry's curls, and his eyes are forced back open from the pain. His father smirks. "I'll give you your mouth back," he says conversationally. "If you can behave. Can you do that for me?"

Harry nods frantically. His father flicks his hand and Harry's mouth is returned to its normal state. Harry takes in a deep, shuddering, desperate breath. His father watches him much like one might watch a science experiment. And when Harry finally settles down, when he gets his breathing under control, he falls silent and looks back up at his father.

"Good," James Potter says approvingly. "Now, turn around."

Harry hesitates.

"Now."

Harry exhales shakily and turns around on his knees until his back is to his father. He can see his mother now, lounging at the other end of the dining table. Her eyes are unreadable from here, but she's watching them. Her lips are twisted into an odd sort of grimacing smile.

The first lash comes without warning.

There is just white hot pain, sharp and unrelenting across his left shoulder blade. Harry cries out and falls forward, catching his weight on his palms. (It doesn't feel like a lash from a belt. Harry wonders if his father is using his wand—if he is slashing Harry with the pure force of unbridled, angry magic. Harry wonders what kind of marks that will leave on his skin.)

"There you go," his father croons from behind him. "This is what you needed, isn't it? A nice firm hand. I knew Riddle wasn't being strict enough with you. How long has it been since someone put you in your place?"

Harry makes a panicked sound. He tries to crawl away but his father grips his ankle, yanking him back to the same spot.

"Dad," Harry whimpers. "Please—"

The second lash lands even heavier. Harry's vision goes white.

"What did I say?" his father snarls, angry again. "Don't make me shut you up again. I don't want to hear any words coming out of your whore mouth."

Harry tries to process the pain, to keep his mouth shut, but when another lash lands across both shoulder blades this time, he cries out and collapses down onto his forearms. After that, the lashes blend one into the next. All Harry knows is pain. He starts to sob, to babble incoherently, to whimper and gasp and moan, to twitch on the floor in agony, and still his father continues. The lashes break skin and Harry feels his blood dripping down his back and sides, soaking into the rug beneath him.

His mother watches.

Harry doesn't know how many lashes he's taken before he slumps fully to the ground and loses consciousness.

-

When Harry comes to, his back feels like a stinging, tangled mass of nerves and bones and blood. He jerks in fright and is stunned to silence when someone pats his hair comfortingly.

"Shh," his mother hums.

He's splayed across her lap, and she's rubbing some sort of antiseptic cream into his wounds. He feels the trace of her wand across his back, the murmur of healing spells, and the itching feeling of skin and tendons knitting themselves back together.

"Mum?" Harry croaks, trembling in her arms.

"Hush," she says in a chiding tone. "It's alright, sweetheart. You were perfect. Your father and I are very proud. I hope you've learned your lesson. I hope you know we love you very much."

Harry goes perfectly still. His mother breathes life back into his destroyed skin, the mutilated cells, his damaged shoulder blades and bruised kidneys. She hums an idle tune.

"Why are you doing this?" he says, his words beginning to slur. His ears are ringing.

"You've earned it," she says to him. "You took your punishment well. I'm going to take care of you, now. We'll get you cleaned up, good as new. And then you can go home to your husband. And you aren't going to tell him anything. You aren't going to bother him with any unsavory details. Are you, sweetheart?"

Harry thinks about it for a while. His mother's hands feel so nice on his back. She's humming lightly again. She seems so happy.

"Okay," he finally mumbles. "If that's… what you want."

"Perfect," his mom gushes. "I'm so proud of you. I'm so *lucky* to call you my son. And you'll behave from now on, won't you? You won't get into trouble again. Because you want to make us happy. You don't want us to have to punish you again. Isn't that right?"

This time, Harry doesn't deliberate as long. "Yes," he says, his heart swelling with some kind of emotion. He's still crying, the tears spilling hotly over his cheeks and dripping to the floor. "I just want you to be happy. I just want a family."

His mother coos. “Of course we’re a family. How could we not be? You’re going to be the perfect son from now on, I just know it. You’re going to make us proud. No more embarrassments.”

“Okay,” Harry says. He smiles, and his lips split. His mouth tastes like blood.

It takes a while for his mother to finish healing him, and to scourgify all of the blood from his skin and clothes. She wipes his face with a cool cloth and Harry leans into the touch.

“It’s time for you to leave now,” she says, and Harry whimpers.

“Wanna stay here,” he mumbles. “Please. With you, mum. Please let me stay. Don’t leave me again.”

“No, no,” she tuts disapprovingly. “You promised, remember?”

Harry can’t remember much of anything. He blinks at her in a daze and she laughs.

“Go on,” she says, pulling him to his feet and pushing him toward the floo. Harry stumbles.

“But when… when will you hold me again?”

His mother sighs. “Go home now, Harry. Back to your husband.” Her voice takes on a hard edge.

Harry flinches and then shakes his head, forcing himself into the fireplace. The flames lick around his body and he stares up at his mother. In the last moments before he’s yanked up and into the floo network, his mother’s adoring smile drops from her face and her mouth twists into a hateful sneer.

Chapter End Notes

tws: corporal punishment, blood and physical/verbal abuse, derogatory language/slut shaming, manipulation, references to past child abuse (vague).

quick summary: Harry's father uses derogatory language to belittle him (slut, whore, cunt) uses magic to remove his mouth, and then whips him repeatedly on his back and his legs. Harry's mother heals him afterward and manipulates him into thinking it was okay, and to not say anything to Tom about what happened.

Thank you again for so much kind and thoughtful feedback!! wow I so did not expect that so many people would enjoy this fic! <3

Chapter 7: 7

Chapter Notes

chapter-specific TWs found in the endnote! please review the story tags as well if you need to.
minor edits 8/3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Life after that night at Potter Manor is… *fuzzy.*

Harry stumbles from the floo straight back to his chambers, brushing off Bitsy's offer for a bath. He climbs right into his bed and burrows under the covers.Bitsy is standing beside him, saying something, one gnarled hand petting gently over his curls, but Harry can't focus enough to process her words. He squirms deeper beneath the blankets and doesn't respond. After a while, she leaves, although he can smell hot cocoa on the nightstand.

-

And so when he wakes the next morning, when he's dragged himself up out of the well of horror and pain that had consumed him from the moment his father used that spell to seal his mouth shut, Harry tries to think of what to do. There's not much use in moving about the manor if he can't use the library, or go outside, or even explore the corridors without fear of suspicion or punishment. He doesn't dare take his books out from underneath the floorboard except for during the early hours of the morning, when the sky is still dark, and he can sit on the window ledge and study by the light of the moon.

(He's nearly exhausted the manor's resources on time travel and alternate dimensions anyway.)

If he had Ron and Hermione with him, Harry thinks maybe—maybe the three of them, working together, could figure out a way home. But he doesn't have them.

Harry spends a lot of time thinking about his wand. He knows that his father has it hidden away somewhere. He knows that if he could get to it, he could at least have a way to defend himself. He could start thinking about an escape plan—That would mean, though, returning to his parent's manor. And Harry doesn't know when he'll be ready for that. He doesn't know if he'll survive another encounter with his mother and father.

(Not *his* father and mother, he reminds himself again, not *really,* although he forgets more and more these days why that matters or what it means or why it is so important to remember at all.)

-

Bitsy continues sending his meals to his chambers the next day, even going so far as to pop them onto his lap in a nice little tray when he doesn't get out of bed. And when he still can't muster the energy to eat when the food is right there in front of him, she tries a different strategy for dinner. Plates of crisps, or biscuits, or painstaking arrangements of cheese and meats, bite-sized foods, things that Harry can eat with his hands.

He tries to eat, especially then, forcing down a couple slices of apple that night because he can tell that she's upset. But the food tastes like sand in his mouth and sits like a stone in his stomach.

After another day or so of this behavior, Bitsy tries to put a stop to it.

"Master Harry is getting out of bed, now," she glares at him. "He is not laying in his bed all day today."

Harry shrugs, lying on his back and staring at the ceiling. His right hand twitches. He had tried a bit of wandless magic the night before, after reading about time turners in one of his books and remembering the year that he and Hermione had gone back in time to rescue Sirius and Buckbeak, and Harry had conjured the patronus that fought off a hundred dementors. Harry had thought that—if he could do something like that with a wand, couldn't he be strong enough to do other kinds of magic, simpler spells, without his wand?

But his best efforts so far had rendered him no satisfactory results.

"What's the point?" he mumbles to Bitsy.

The house elf makes a frustrated sound. She stamps her foot. "Master Harry cannot live in his bed," she says. "He is needing to get up and move around and do something besides sleep."

Harry sits up on the edge of his bed and rubs his fingers over one of the blankets. He eyes the tray beside him, small platters of fruits and cheese, crackers, a steaming cup of earl gray, but he swallows hard and looks away. His stomach flips. He thinks faintly of his father's angry gaze, the hot sting of magic and the falsely comforting tone of his mother, her hands stroking over Harry's back, trailing through warm blood. He thinks of the door to the library, locked, and he thinks of Riddle's white, furious face, his fists clenched, the way he had dragged

Harry out of that party and home, unwilling to let Harry say even one word in defense of himself.

Then Harry forces himself to stop thinking about anything at all. “I’m tired,” he explains to Bitsy, his tone dull.

She frowns. “Master Harry is not tired,” she insists. “Master Harry is thinking he is in trouble. He is being sad again. Bitsy is,” she hesitates, and her brow furrows. “Bitsy is explaining to Master Riddle. She is telling him to give Master Harry another chance, to see that Master Harry is trying his hardest, that he is being sad and something is being wrong but —Master Riddle is not listening,” she finally says. “He is having too many meetings and too much work to do and he is being too angry. He is feeling betrayed by his husband and he is not having time to listen to a house elf. He is not wanting to understand what Bitsy is telling him. But Master Harry cannot give up, Bitsy is trying every day, she is not letting Master Harry be—”

“It’s okay,” Harry says. He feels a thread of unease at the thought of Bitsy bothering Riddle with her concerns. Harry doesn’t want Riddle to get upset with Bitsy, too. He doesn’t want her to get dragged further into Harry’s mess. “It’s okay,” he says again, mainly to pacify the elf. “I’m sorry, Bitsy. I… you’re right. I am being a bit dramatic. Of course, I can… I can get up for a bit.”

Bitsy sighs, and she seems relieved as she watches him stand up out of his bed and shrug on a sweater. Harry pushes his feet into his slippers and pulls on his dressing gown, smoothing it over his chest and tying it around his waist.

“Good,” Bitsy nods approvingly, smiling at him.

“How long—” Harry rasps, his throat thick.

“As long as Master Harry wants, as long as he is being out of bed for longer than one hour,” Bitsy says firmly. “Bitsy is being in the kitchen for the afternoon, she is doing her work but she is coming if Master Harry calls, if he is needing anything.”

“Okay,” Harry says with a sigh, padding over to the door as Bitsy pops out of existence. He waits a beat, and then—

He shuffles right up to the top floor and—

Crouches down and—

Climbs into the cupboard.

-

Harry was right—it is similar to the one under the stairs at Privet Drive. A little smaller, really, but not bad. It's quiet, and warm, and dark. No padlock on the door, which is a plus.

And—Bitsy mostly lets him stay in his room, in his bed, after that. After she finds him in the cupboard hours later and her eyes are wild with alarm, her chest heaving. She reprimands him sharply but Harry doesn't have the energy to respond.

***

Another foggy day or two passes in much the same way, and then one morning Harry wakes and Riddle is once again sitting in the armchair near the door. Harry sits up in alarm, his eyes darting around the room in confusion. He hasn't seen Riddle in days. He hasn't really seen anyone in days, except for Bitsy.

"Bitsy tells me you're not eating."

Harry blinks. His eyes drift to the window. He jumps and rears back in alarm when Riddle is suddenly standing right next to the bed, a tray of food clenched in his hands.

Harry swallows. "I'm not hungry."

"I don't care," Riddle says. He sets the tray on the bed right in front of Harry and scowls at him. "You will eat."

"But I don't—"

"I don't know what your goal is with this latest hunger strike," Riddle says coldly, "but Bitsy has plenty of other responsibilities. She doesn't have time to ply you with snacks and treats and fun activities at all hours of the day like a petulant child."

Harry flinches.

"And I don't have the time in my schedule to listen to Bitsy's constant complaints. I'm a busy man. I have very real, adult responsibilities to deal with beyond the constant temper tantrums of my spoiled husband. We had an agreement, and you disobeyed me. Isn't that right?"

"...Right," Harry says. He stares down at his blanket.

“Then if you want to stay in this marriage, in this manor with me, you’ll eat three meals a day. You’ll go outside for an hour each morning. You’ll resume your regular bathing schedule with Bitsy. And if you can’t do these simple tasks, if you refuse to take care of yourself, then I,” Riddle hesitates. “I suppose I will have no choice but to dissolve our marriage contract and you will have to move back in with your parents.”

Harry freezes. He looks up at Riddle in horror.

“I am at a loss for what else to do,” Riddle says stiffly. “You won’t listen to me. I can’t trust you in public, or with anyone besides myself or Bitsy or your parents. And this marriage has put a strain on my work for far too long.” Riddle sighs. His gaze softens minutely for just a moment before hardening again. “I thought we were making progress, before that party. I thought we were beginning to understand each other. But I was clearly wrong.”

Harry’s ears have filled with static. He can’t even process Riddle’s words beyond his threat. Does Riddle know? Does he know what Harry’s father did to him? Does he think that Harry deserved it?

“Yes or no, Harry. Will you do this? Are you going to quit the theatrics and stop disturbing Bitsy so that she can prioritise her main responsibilities?”

“Y-yes,” Harry chokes out.

“Good,” Riddle says. “Then I believe we’re done here. I have meetings to attend. Bitsy will report to me your progress each day. If you start to slip up again then we will discuss the consequences.”

Harry closes his eyes. He thinks of the white hot lash of magic cutting across his shoulder blade.

“Right,” he says, his voice hollow. *Consequences*.

When he opens his eyes again, Riddle is gone. Harry looks down at the plate of food beside his knee. He picks up the spoon.

***

Harry spends more and more time in his new cupboard on the top floor. He can't get out of his morning excursions now, although Bitsy can't force him to do much beyond lounging in the grass. He dutifully eats his three meals a day under her careful eye, forcing back the nausea until she's gone and he can stumble to the bathroom, expelling everything in his stomach and trembling over the toilet, his eyes blown out and his throat aching.

He doesn't see Riddle again, so Harry thinks he must be doing well enough. And Bitsy, although she dutifully checks on him morning, noon and night, and supervises each time he ventures into the grounds for his daily exercise, does not seem to know how else to help him. When she seals off his cupboard with magic Harry goes nonverbal for so long, his face white and hands shaking, eyes shuttered, that Bitsy eventually gives in and reinstates the door and does not try to remove him from his cupboard again.

It's nice—no expectations, no one to talk to, to sneer at him and mutter vulgar words in his ear. Harry is glad that Riddle has given up on him. He's glad that no one seems to care where he goes or what he does. He's glad that he's not getting taken along to ministry events, or to dinners with his parents, and he's glad that Malfoy and Nott can't reach him in this manor, because he's afraid that if he ran into Nott again, he wouldn't have the energy or mental fortitude to stave his advances off.

Harry knows it's not exactly healthy—he knows that something is wrong with him. He knows that walking through life in a fog like this is dangerous. But he can't help himself. He's exhausted and alone. He's stuck here and he's never going to find his way back. So why try? Why continue reading books or exploring or spending time with Bitsy, who after all is technically more of a housekeeper than a friend, and whose efforts to help Harry have more often than not made things worse.

Why do anything at all?

-

And then one day, Harry is climbing into his cupboard when he hesitates for a moment. His eyes flicker across the hall. He doesn't know how he has never noticed it before—a long, winding staircase leading upward, likely to the roof, or to some kind of attic, since he is already on the top floor.

An odd prickle of curiosity pushes him forward to check it out. (It's rare for him nowadays to feel much of anything, so he tries to indulge himself when he can.)

The stairs lead up to the roof. Harry steps carefully, blinking up at the sun and walking to the edge. He can see the entire grounds from here and beyond. He takes in a long, deep inhale,

and exhales slowly. The air is brisk, nearly cold, likely because he's closer to the wards, and far from the grass that is always warm and damp. Harry thinks that this is far better than exploring the grounds below, and infinitely better than his cupboard. He can be outside and not feel like he's on a leash, like Bitsy is watching him every second. And Riddle doesn't know he's here, so there's no chance that the man will suddenly appear, making demands or accusations at Harry or standing far too close for comfort.

Harry perches at the edge of the roof. His legs swing over the side. There's a light breeze, and soft white clouds drifting across the sky. Harry looks down again and an odd, excited feeling twists in his stomach. The ground below is so far. If he were to slip off this ledge, just on accident, if he were to fall… What's the worst that could happen?

Maybe he would get another chance. He could see Dumbledore again. Maybe this time, he would take the right train. And he would see his parents again. And they wouldn't hurt him. They would just hold him close, run their fingers through his hair, kiss the top of his head, and tell him how much they love him. Harry could be done fighting, he could rest, and finally be at peace.

Harry's heart positively aches at the thought. He feels himself leaning forward slightly, and then—

He shakes his head, eyes widening, heart thudding in his chest, and immediately retreats from the roof. He walks all the way down the stairs, past his cupboard and back into his room. He climbs into his bed and burrows beneath the sheets. It takes a long time for his hands to stop shaking.

-

"Please," Harry begs. "I didn't do it."

"Yes, you did," Voldemort hisses.

Harry can't see. He's kneeling, his arms bound in front of him, and the sting of the lash comes crashing down again. Harry falls forward. The side of his face smacks into the cold floor. "Stop," he cries, his words muffled.

"You deserve it. You deserve to suffer, to bleed and break and plead for mercy on hands and knees. I've taught you better, haven't I? No horcrux of mine would behave in such a shameful manner."

“No, I’m not—” Harry chokes. He tries to push up off the ground. “I’m not. I’m not a horcrux. Not anymore, it’s gone, you destroyed it—”

The lash comes down again. Harry jerks, his body ringing with pain, and lets out a tortured gasp. His spine arches unnaturally.

“Of course you are. Why else would I marry you? You make a terrible husband. You can’t do anything right.”

Harry shakes his head in silent protest. His back feels wet with blood, and his forehead is pounding. “No,” he sobs. “I’m not yours, I’m not your husband. This isn’t real.” He squeezes his eyes shut and pleads silently that this is all a dream, that he will wake up at the burrow with Ron in the bunk beside him, a soft sunrise bleeding through the curtains and Molly’s cooking wafting from downstairs in the cozy kitchen.

But he does not wake up. The lashes only pause, and a cold, bony hand drags inquisitively up from the base of his spine to the nape of his neck and squeezes hard. Then Voldemort is leaning in close, his body blanketing Harry’s, and his lips are grazing Harry’s ear.

“Just because it is happening inside your head, does not mean it isn’t real,” Voldemort hisses.

Harry goes cold all over. His heart clenches and he shakes his head furiously. “No,” he says. “No, please. Stop it. Don’t—”

“Yes,” Voldemort says. He inhales, shifts closer, and fits his teeth around the curve of Harry’s shoulder. Harry whines. He tries to squirm away, to throw him off to no avail, and Voldemort bites down hard. His teeth sink in like fangs.

Harry screams. He jerks, his hands twitching in their binds, warm blood dripping down his shoulder and the wound stinging fierce enough to make his eyes water. And Voldemort does not relent. He does not let go. He only digs his teeth in harder. His hand tightens around Harry’s throat until Harry cannot breathe at all. He feels lightheaded. He stops fighting and goes limp. Only then does Voldemort withdraw his bite. He lifts up, just barely, and Harry feels the wet drag of a snake-like tongue over the wound that is still spurting blood onto the floor around him. He makes a weak sound of protest, lifting his head, and Voldemort pushes him back down.

“Behave,” he hums, his mouth pressed to Harry’s shoulder, like they are lovers, like Harry asked for this, like Harry is shivering in pleasure and not agony.

“You said you wouldn’t hurt me,” Harry forces out. “You—”

“I would never say such a thing,” Voldemort says, sounding like he is half-listening. His palm is ice-cold on Harry’s neck. “Hurting you is my favorite past-time.”

“Go away,” Harry suddenly says, and Voldemort stills. “I want Tom. You’re not real.”

“Silence,” Voldemort hisses, sounding furious.

“You’re not real,” Harry forces out again, wheezing through bloodied teeth. Voldemort screeches in rage. He lurches up, and magic hums all around them. The lashes start to rain down again nonstop, indiscriminately, white hot pain everywhere all at once, and Harry loses his grip. He sinks back into the darkness. “Tom,” he mumbles again, in a pleading whisper.

“Tom isn’t here right now.”

-

Harry wakes to the feel of a hand on his shoulder. Bitsy is at his bedside, shaking him, her hands curled tight around his shoulders. He shoots upright with a choked gasp and shoves her away.

“Master Harry,” she exclaims with wide, terrified eyes.

“Don’t touch me.” Harry can’t breathe. His entire body is trembling, his heart jittering in his chest, and there are phantom pains in his shoulder, like the bruised indent of fangs. He runs a shaking hand over the spot and is bewildered to feel nothing but smooth skin. He hasn’t had a dream this vivid in weeks. He forgot how real they could feel.

“Master Harry is having a bad one,” Bitsy insists. She takes him by the elbow and tugs. “He is needing a warm bath and a glass of milk and—”

“No,” Harry says. His grip on the sheets is unrelenting. “I don’t want to. Stop it.”

“Master Harry must. Bitsy is begging him to—”

“NO, Bitsy,” Harry shouts, his voice hoarse and cracking, shoving her away harder this time. She stumbles back and nearly falls. Harry’s eyes flash. “I asked you not to touch me.”

“Master Harry,” she starts, looking like she might cry. “Bitsy is sorry, but she thinks Master Harry needs help, he needs—”

“You don’t know what I need. You don’t know me *at all* . You can’t help me. Don’t fucking touch me, don’t come near me, and stop trying to fix me. You can’t fix this. Just leave me alone.” Harry’s voice breaks on the last word. He falls silent and curls into himself, tucking his head beneath the blanket, his shoulders trembling.

Bitsy seems at a loss for words. He can feel her presence there, in the room, for a very long time. Eventually she leaves, although not before there is a quiet pop and the smell of chocolate and cinnamon filters through the air.

And Harry, well—once he is sure that he's finally alone, he knows what he needs to do.

He goes back up to the roof.

-

It's raining this time.

Harry perches on the ledge. The wind is brisk, and Harry can't see any stars through the heavy cloud cover. He wraps his dressing gown tightly around himself and tries not to look down.

He's cold. He shouldn't have come out here. He should have let Bitsy talk him into a bath. He should have eaten something, had some water, did anything to get his mind away from the despairing, desolate pit his dream dropped him into.

Minutes pass, or hours, while Harry sits on the edge of the roof and tries not to look down. The rain soaks his clothes and into his skin. Harry shivers for a while, and then he stops. He starts to feel oddly warm. "I'm not a horcrux," he mumbles to himself. "I'm not. And Tom… isn't Voldemort. He's just Tom. And my parents aren't my parents. And this isn't my world. It's not my home. And… I don't belong here."

Harry tilts his head downward. The rain drops look odd, barrelling toward the ground like little bullets. He wonders how it will feel. Will he still feel the rain while he's falling? Will it be cold?

He hopes he'll go to King's Cross again. Or, maybe even better, he hopes that his fall will take him into a dark, quiet nothingness. A peaceful resting place where no one and nothing can reach him. He can hide there for eternity, knees curled to his chest, his mind blissfully empty. And maybe Tom will find a better match. Someone to be his husband who he won't have to treat like a misbehaving child. Someone he can be proud of. Someone who can look him in the eye and not see echoing flashes of dead friends and family.

Harry gives in. He feels himself start to tip forward. His hands, where they grip the ledge, loosen. He feels gravity pulling at him, anticipating his descent, ready to weigh him down to his death. To freedom. Just when he's about to do it, when he's moments away from no return —

An arm wraps around his waist and yanks him forcefully away from the edge.

-

They tumble backwards together over the wet concrete. Harry is startled and faintly dismayed. He twists around and finds himself face to face with a white-faced, furious Tom Riddle.

“What,” Riddle spits out, “in the bloody hell were you thinking?”

Harry stares at him. It had seemed so obvious ten seconds ago. Now that he’s away from the edge, and he can’t look down to the ground, his thoughts are muddled. And he’s cold again.

“Answer me!”

“I… I dunno,” Harry stammers out. “I… I wondered how it would feel. The rain.”

Riddle flinches. His arm, which is still wrapped around Harry’s waist, tightens and pulls them closer together. Harry shivers. They go back inside. When Harry stumbles over his feet, when he can’t keep up, Riddle lifts him into his arms, one arm supporting his back and the other beneath his knees.

“You’re soaked,” Riddle mutters through gritted teeth. “How long were you out there?”

Harry curls into Riddle’s chest. He hasn’t been held like this since the night his father tore his back open and his mother nursed him back to health. “I dunno,” he says again. His words slur together. “M’cold.” His teeth begin to chatter, and Riddle’s arms go very tight around him and he begins to walk even faster.

Harry closes his eyes, and when he opens them next he’s stood in the middle of his chambers and Riddle has his wand out, pointed at Harry’s soaked clothing. Harry shudders. He tries to push Riddle away, but his limbs feel too weak and uncoordinated.

“Stop,” Harry mumbles.

Riddle pauses. “You need to get out of these clothes.”

“No,” Harry whimpers, shaking his head. His teeth chatter.

Riddle makes a frustrated sound. “Bitsy.”

The house elf pops into the room and then gasps. “Master Harry!”

“Bitsy,” Riddle says again. “Will you tell him he needs to remove his wet clothing?”

Bitsy’s face is tear-stained, her eyes swollen. She takes Harry’s hand in hers and tugs his attention to her. “Master Harry is needing to get warm,” she tells him. “He is taking these wet clothes off and getting in bed.”

“Taking them… off?” Harry asks, trembling, his eyes huge. “But, I don’t— I don’t want to —”

Riddle swears a low oath, shifting on his feet, eyes dark and his hands twitching. “Harry, this is no time for—”

“Bitsy is taking care of it, if Master Harry wishes?” Bitsy interrupts. She squeezes Harry’s hand, smiling tremulously at him. “Bitsy is getting rid of them with a snap of her fingers.”

Harry doesn’t respond. His eyes dart nervously to Riddle.

“You need direct skin-to-skin contact,” Riddle says, his voice firm, like it is non-negotiable. “Get undressed, and get under the bedsheets.”

Harry hesitates for a while, trying to corral his foggy thoughts, long enough that he can sense Riddle and Bitsy both growing more agitated. Finally, he nods, curling into himself, shivering, and braces for his clothing to be removed. Bitsy’s eyes soften. She snaps her fingers and Harry jumps. All at once he feels horribly exposed, and even colder, although Bitsy quickly takes him by the elbow and pushes him underneath the covers. She snaps her fingers again and another thick comforter settles over him. Harry sinks into the mattress and closes his eyes. He feels Bitsy’s old, gnarled hand rest briefly on his forehead. There is a flood of heat, and his dripping, tangled curls are dry in an instant.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbles.

Bitsy makes an anguished sound. “Master Harry is not apologizing,” she says. “He is getting warm and not freezing to death.”

There’s a dip of weight on the bed then, a shifting of sheets, and Harry goes tense. He turns slightly and blinks up at Riddle right beside him, who is looking at him with an oddly tight expression.

Almost… concerned? But—that can’t be right. Harry’s vision swims and he shudders, his body wracking with more shivers. Riddle shifts closer, wrapping his arm around Harry’s waist and pulling him close until his back is pressed right up to Riddle’s chest. It’s incredibly warm, and Harry feels himself immediately relax, his limbs loosening and the chattering of his teeth slowing.

“There you go,” Riddle says, his tone uncharacteristically soft. A discomfiting caress. He cradles Harry’s head in the crook of his arm. Harry can feel nearly every bit of their bodies pressing together.

“You’re… you’re going to send me away now,” he says with a gasping shudder, pressing further back into Riddle’s hold. He wants to soak up as much warmth as he can before it’s taken away. “Conse… consequences.”

“No, I am not,” Riddle murmurs. His breath is warm on Harry’s ear.

“But… you said… you said…” Harry’s words are slurring even more now, and he’s losing track of his thoughts.

“I know what I said.”

“I just… wanted it to be… over. I didn’t want to fight anymore.”

Riddle’s arms go even tighter around him. “I should never have said that, darling. I was angry. Of course I’m not going to… I won’t send you away. Certainly not for something like this.”

Another shiver wracks through Harry’s frame. “You—do you… promise? But… what if I mess up… again? Theo was so…” he struggles to find the words for what his half-frozen mind is so suddenly desperate to communicate. “I couldn’t—I said no. I did. But he— he wouldn’t.”

Riddle goes perfectly, dangerously still. *“What?”*

Harry squirms with discomfort. His thoughts swim. Alarm bells begin to faintly ring in the back of his mind, and he feels as if he’s said something he shouldn’t have.

“What did you say, Harry?”

“I don’t… erm. I can’t… what were we… talking about?”

“About Nott.”

Harry cringes. He tries to pull away, to put space between them, but Riddle’s hold only tightens. He manhandles Harry so that his back is pressed to the sheets, and then he rests one warm restraining palm over Harry’s chest, keeping him still.

“I’m sorry.” Harry’s voice trembles.

“It’s alright,” Riddle says. He rubs the pad of his thumb over Harry’s collarbone. Harry shivers. “It’s alright. I know. Just— I want you to tell me, Harry. Speak plainly. Tell me what happened with Nott.”

Harry’s body floods with terror. Why does his husband want to know about that? Harry already—he tried, he told his parents the truth, and they hurt him. Is that what Riddle wants? Does he want to trick Harry into another confession, so he can send him off to be punished again?

“Please, Tom,” he says. “I don’t— I just wanted to be good for you. A good husband.” He struggles again, trying to put space between them, but Riddle won’t allow it. He presses down a bit harder on Harry’s chest and hovers over him, warm breath ghosting across his cheeks.

“Master Harry needs his rest,” Bitsy cuts in just when Riddle has opened his mouth to speak. She is standing right beside the bed, her arms crossed, sounding angry. She glares at Riddle. A muscle in Riddle’s jaw flexes, and his eyes are dangerously dark. He seems furious. But he

only tucks the blankets more securely around Harry. He wraps his arms around him again, tucking him back up very firmly to his chest. Harry sighs with relief and presses himself back into the wall of warmth.

“I’m not going to send you away,” Riddle finally says, sounding pained. “Do you understand me? I just want you to get warm and get some sleep. And we will discuss this in the morning. Alright?”

Harry hums a sleepy, half-conscious sound of assent, pressing his cheek to the warm heat of Riddle’s arm. His teeth are still chattering, but he doesn’t feel so cold and empty anymore. He feels safe and warm, nearly cradled, and his thoughts so directionless that he gives up on trying to form rational thought. He falls into a deep sleep just like that, stripped down to his pants, bundled into Riddle’s chest, cocooned in heavy blankets, listening to the faint sound of Bitsy humming and Riddle’s quiet breaths ghosting over Harry’s neck, warming him inside and out.

Chapter End Notes

specific TWs for this chapter:
-disordered eating
-dissociation
-suicidal thoughts
-suicide attempt
-references to past abuse
-graphic violence including corporal punishment (taking place in a dream)

quick summary:
Harry spends an unknown amount of time in shock, not eating or doing much of anything. Tom threatens to divorce Harry if he doesn't start taking care of himself. Harry self-isolates in a cupboard on the top floor of the manor where he eventually finds stairs leading to the roof. After a bad nightmare one night (wherein he is tortured by Voldemort), he goes to the roof and decides to jump. Riddle finds him before he can and pulls him back to safety.

Thank you to everyone who's following along and commenting! I love and appreciate any positive feedback. I've been a bit overwhelmed lately and haven't felt up to responding lol but I promise I will get around to it eventually! I hope you guys enjoyed this one!

Chapter 8: 8

Chapter Summary

The one where Tom does a lot of thinking.

Chapter Notes

TWs for this chapter in the endnote!

Tom's pov doesn't come to me as well as Harry's, so I hope I did him justice! It was super fun exploring his side of things and revealing some of what his and other-Harry's relationship was like. I hope this chapter explains some of his behavior, and adequately explains his complicated feelings regarding Harry! We still have a long ways to go, though.

(I wasn't expecting to love other-Harry so much, but this chapter did it for me. I'm definitely now planning on at least a few bonus chapters where we'll see what happened to him after the bodyswap. because I need to see him getting his happy ending too.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tom Riddle stares down at his husband in abject horror.

The man in question is fast asleep wrapped up in Tom’s arms, hints of rosy color slowly returning to his pale, sunken cheeks. Across the room, he hears Bitsy shuffling in her seat.

Tom thinks perhaps he should dismiss her for the night, order her to get some rest, to give them some privacy, but—he saw the raw fear, worry and guilt plain in her eyes, reflected in his own.

Neither of them are going to take their eyes off Harry anytime soon.

And Tom doesn’t know what exactly has caused this change between Harry and Bitsy these past few months, but his house elf’s loyalties have clearly shifted. She alternates now between eyeing Harry in tearful concern and shooting Tom thinly-veiled looks of disgust.

Tom grimaces. He avoids her eye, instead staring back down at Harry. He smooths his hand over his husband’s rumpled curls and Harry makes a muted sound, squirming in the sheets, his brow furrowing and eyelids fluttering.

“Shh,” Tom says very quietly. He tightens his arm around Harry’s waist, keeping him firmly pressed up to Tom’s chest. After a few moments of faint, sleepy struggling, Harry goes limp. He turns his head and nuzzles his cheek into the sheets.

“Tom,” he mumbles.

“Yes,” Tom breathes. “I’m here, Harry. Rest now.”

Harry inhales deeply and sighs. After a few minutes, his breaths even back out and his mouth falls open. He begins to quietly snore. Tom feels something extremely painful grip his heart as he watches.

-

If only he hadn’t been so completely overcome with angry, vengeful pride. If only he had listened, the numerous times that Bitsy had approached to tell him that something was wrong. Instead he had ignored her, brushed her off, told her to deal with it and to stop needling him about his bratty, bothersome husband.

Because most of it— the pouting, sulking, hunger strikes, illicit affairs— was nothing new.

Tom had in fact grown quite accustomed to dealing with his husband’s outbursts, his temper tantrums, and his media scandals in the year and a half they’d been married. Any initial hope he’d had of fostering a happy and successful union— (not loving, no, nor devoted either, because he had known from the start that those things would likely be unattainable within an arranged marriage, and for so differing a pairing for the two of them in the first place) — had immediately dissolved during the first month of their marriage.

Tom had stumbled upon Harry in their shared bed one afternoon, half-dressed, moaning wantonly in the sheets, legs spread and back arched while another man thrust into him, a complete *stranger,* dirtying their manor with foul language and utterly disregarding one of the few rules they had both agreed upon.

“What is going on here?” Riddle had asked coldly, his arms folded across his chest.

Harry had only deigned to respond after the man had thrust into him a few more times, moaning quite lewdly, swearing loudly and then the two of them had collapsed into a sweaty heap on the sheets.

“I asked you a question, husband,” Tom had said through gritted teeth, his eyes averted.

Although the two of them had consummated their marriage, of course, (as was the required custom for wizarding unions,) it hadn’t been—like *this.* It hadn’t been filled with passion, with heat, with frenzied movements and excited grunts and groans. They had done what they

had to do, and then they had gone to sleep on separate sides of the bed, not touching, Harry with his back to Riddle and his arms and legs curled up tightly to his chest.

And so looking down on the illicit scene then, Tom could feel his face going red. His fists had clenched. He had felt a compelling urge to grab the unnamed wizard around the throat and slam him up against the wall, to beat him senseless with his fists, to force past the defenses of his mind and erase every single memory the man had of Harry, of the way his husband looked underneath his clothing, how his skin felt, how he sounded when he was touched just right, when he was pressed down into the sheets and—

It hadn't been right. Harry was *Tom's husband.*

Yes, it was an arranged marriage of course, and— yes, Harry had not *explicitly* agreed on monogamy. That hadn't been part of their agreement. In fact—Harry had argued vehemently for his freedom surrounding those matters.

Still, Riddle had thought he could at least expect a modicum of decorum. Of respect. He had assumed that, should either of them feel the need to seek physical pleasure elsewhere, they would perform the act discreetly, far away from their home and away from any prying, curious eyes. Far away from where Tom would have to see Harry's head thrown back, his mouth open, warm sweat dripping down his spine and his body positively vibrating with pleasure.

Harry had barely glanced at him. "Oh," he had said, a sly, pleased grin at the corner of his mouth. Like he had been hoping Tom would catch him. "You're home early, aren't you?"

Tom had gaped at him in disbelief. "Harry. You can't possibly—"

"I can do what I want, actually," Harry had snapped. In an instant, all of the amusement had melted out of his expression. He had sat up on the bed and pulled on his dressing gown, an angry, mutinous look on his face. "Get out," he had said to the other man.

"Now?" the other man had said, a bit of a whine in his tone.

"I got what I wanted, and I'd like for you to leave now, yes," Harry had said, his tone very cool. "Thanks for the perfectly average lay."

The man had spluttered, his face going bright red, but Harry hadn't budged. Tom and Harry both had watched with little interest as the man tugged on his robes and gathered his things.

"Will you at least send an owl—"

"Get out," Harry had repeated, his face contorting with fury and the man had flinched, hurrying out of the room. Only then had Harry's expression calmed. He had turned back to face Tom and smirked.

"Want to take a turn?" he had asked coyly, patting the mattress.

"What—" Tom had choked out, gaping at his husband.

“I saw you watching,” Harry had said. He had sprawled back on the bed, resting his weight on his elbows, his dressing gown falling half-open. Tom’s gaze went straight to his husband’s soft, pale skin. He swallowed with difficulty, unable to tear his eyes away.

“You could slide right in, you know. He did all the hard work.”

Tom had made a mangled sound, his eyes widening and a low heat coiling in his stomach. He had stepped one foot closer to the bed without quite realising it.

Harry, watching him through dark eyes, had grinned. He had sunk even further back on the bed, stretching his arms above his head and parting his legs. “How do you want me?” he had murmured. “Just like this? Or do you want me on my knees?” Harry had flipped over, pressing his cheek into the mattress and arching his back, spreading his knees and hiking his dressing gown up over his hips.

Tom’s mouth had gone dry. He had felt faintly sick. “Harry, that’s... No. We need to have a conversation about—”

“I don’t want to talk,” Harry had interrupted. His voice had sounded hard and sharp, annoyed, but then it had quickly melted back into the smooth lilting purr. “You don’t either, do you? Remember our wedding night? You want to take me like that again? Face to face, gazing dreamily into each other's eyes like an old married couple? Like we’re in love?” Harry had rolled his eyes a bit. “That’s what gets you off, isn’t it?”

Tom had shook his head, beginning to feel frustrated and overheated. “You can’t avoid talking to me, Harry. We have to—”

“Or maybe you like it rough?” Harry had mused, ignoring him. He had pressed himself lower into the sheets. “You want to hold me down? You want to make it hurt?”

Tom had flinched. His face had gone white. “No. I don’t want that.”

“I think you do. I won’t stop you, you know? I’ll let you fuck me however you like. I’m not picky. You could even—”

“Enough,” Tom had shouted then, feeling abruptly furious. A wave of hot magic had exploded with his words, rattling the furniture and making cracks appear in the window.

On the bed, Harry went perfectly still.

It had taken a while for Tom to get ahold of himself. He had taken in several deep breaths, inhaling slowly, clenching and unclenching his fists. All the while Harry stayed motionless on the bed, still on his hands and knees, his face pressed into the sheets.

“I’m not going to fuck you,” Riddle had finally said, his voice perfectly calm. “Not in our bed, not right after you’ve defiled it. You think I like watching my husband with another man?”

“Maybe,” Harry had said, after it was clear that Tom was waiting for a response. He had finally relaxed his position, pushing himself up to sit cross-legged on the bed facing Tom.

“You must take me for a fool, then. You thought to humiliate me, is that right? You wanted to see how I would react. Why?”

Harry had made a noncommittal sound. “Thought it might be fun,” he finally said. “Been bored.” He had shrugged and grinned, a hard glint to his eyes.

Tom’s face had contorted with disgust. “Right. I really don’t know what else I expected.”

“You agreed to it,” Harry had said. “In the contract, it stated—”

Yes,” Riddle had hissed. “You may very well do as you please. That much is true. But you may not flaunt your paramours all over the manor.”

Harry had scoffed.

“Do not let me find you in such a compromising position again. Do you understand? This arrangement is not something to be so casually thrown aside—”

“So you’re really not going to fuck me?” Harry had asked, pouting, not listening to a word coming out of his mouth. “What, you don’t think I’m pretty enough? You remember how good it felt, don’t you? It’s been weeks, Tom. I bet you’re positively aching to shove your prick up my—”

Tom had growled in anger, stalking forward toward Harry on the bed, who was waiting with an expectant, triumphant look on his face. But Tom had only grabbed him by the front of his dressing gown and shook him slightly.

“I said that’s enough,” he had snapped. “You will cease this inappropriate behavior at once.”

“Or what?” Harry had grinned, leaning in close. “Going to punish me?”

Tom had flushed.

“Going to put me over your lap and spank me? You think that’ll make me behave?” Harry’s eyes were half-lidded, his chest heaving, body tight with a rigid tension, like he actually believed Tom was going to push him down into the sheets and ravage him.

And Tom, for just a moment, hadn’t been quite sure *what* he was going to do.

He had felt wildly out of control, furious, and— achingly aroused, yes, painfully so, although he would never admit as much to his husband.

(He had suspected Harry knew as much, anyway, by the smug look on the man’s face.)

“No,” Tom had said instead. “I’m not going to play into your manipulative little games. You may continue your sexual dalliances as frequently as you’d like, so long as you stay out of my sight and you are discreet. That is what we agreed to in the marriage contract and so that is what is acceptable to me. Should you cross a line again, rest assured there will be consequences.”

Harry's gaze had darkened. "Oh, really."

"You cannot expect me to stand by and allow—"

"If you're not going to fuck me, then get out," Harry had suddenly said, his face going blank. "I don't want to look at you anymore. You've ruined my afternoon."

And Tom had felt terribly, horribly angry again. But he had reigned it in this time, swallowing it down, shoving it deep inside so that he could control his emotions, so that he could pretend he did not care.

"As you wish," he had muttered bitterly and then stormed out.

And that night, instead of forcing himself to lie beside his husband through the night, neither of them touching, an entire ocean of space between them, Tom had instead selected another room in the manor, on a different floor, and had settled in for the night alone.

-

So had set the tone for their tumultuous, loveless marriage, one of raised voices and anger, lies, communication failures at every turn, and more and more public humiliations and sloppy affairs. Tom had grown incurably frustrated, furious with his husband, losing hope day by day that he would be able to find a way to connect with Harry, to form at least—if nothing else— a casual friendship, a relationship based on mutual respect and trust.

He could not, for the life of him, understand why Harry had agreed to the marriage, why he had been so willing to move into Riddle manor, had agreed to all of Tom's terms, but the moment the union was consummated he had entirely changed his attitude, growing cold and distant and resentful.

(When he wasn't trying to seduce Tom into his bed, that is, or— trying to manipulate Tom into giving him money, or— begging to be released from his responsibilities for the weekend so he could spend a few salacious nights out on the town with his equally-badly-behaved cousin Draco.)

-

And so, between his work with the ministry and his preoccupation with his public image, Tom had found himself spending less and less time at home as the months had gone by. He hadn't wanted to see or speak to his husband. He had thought that both of them might be happier that way in any case—Harry, left to his devices, and Tom, able to finally focus on his job and not have to worry about the next time he would see his husband plastered over the papers with his latest paramour.

He had given Harry space, allowed him his own private chambers—nearly an entire wing of the manor all to himself—so that Harry could do what he wanted without Tom having to walk in on his husband with a strange man wrapped around him.

(It still happened, sometimes, at random moments, and Tom had begun to think that Harry was doing it on purpose, trying to get a rise out of Tom so they could get into another screaming match.)

And Harry, despite all of Tom's allowances, despite the numerous chances Tom gave his husband, continued to humiliate him. And Tom had grown tired of it. His reputation as the minister of magic had grown shaky, and his working relationship with Harry's parents was filled with tension. And so he had given up on trying to make things work. He had graduated to cold threats, to hard rules, and to consequences. He had been forced to treat his husband like an unruly, misbehaving child.

Of course, none of that had worked, either—at least, not at first.

Not until a few months back, really, now that Tom thinks of it. Not until the days came that Harry began to spend more and more time in his chambers, lounging quietly, or reading in the library to Tom's great astonishment. And Tom— he had begun to hope that this was the start of a new, exciting development for their marriage. He had thought that perhaps Harry was beginning to warm up to his role as Tom's husband. He had thought that maybe the scandals and humiliations had finally come to an end.

Tom had given him a chance, then, had brought him along to the ministry party and had been excited to finally have his husband at his side, to not have to answer prying questions about 'that wayward Potter heir' and explain away Harry's constant absences.

And Harry had humiliated him, yet again.

So Tom had felt himself entirely giving up hope that night, after dragging his husband home and having to spend the rest of the evening doing damage control, handling the dozens of owls from colleagues and news outlets and Harry's parents. He realised then (or so he thought) that it was hopeless. Harry was never going to respect him. He was never going to put effort into the marriage. He was going to continue to do everything he could to sabotage their peace and happiness until the only possible route was to split ways and try to salvage what they could of the pieces left behind.

-

But Tom, looking down at his husband now, lying perfectly still in the bed, chest rising and falling with slow breaths, brow still slightly furrowed as if in pain— No, Tom can see very clearly now that he was wrong.

Very wrong.

He has been a complete, utter fool, in fact, to allow himself to believe that Harry's behavior over these past few months has been anywhere close to normal or good. His heart seizes again when he remembers how he had felt when Bitsy had apparated directly into his study a few hours previously to announce with great urgency,

"Master Harry is being missing. He is having a night terror and now he is being gone from his chambers. Bitsy is searching for two hours and she is not finding him."

-

Tom had been annoyed, at first. Highly inconvenienced. Ready to scold his husband the moment he found him. But then—as he began to use his magic to comb the manor, Bitsy at his side—he had time to really think about the wording she had chosen.

"Night terror?" he had repeated, opening up a dusty cupboard on the top floor.

There was nothing inside save a threadbare blanket and an old, worn copy of The Secret Garden. Tom's stomach had flipped. What had Harry been doing in there? Why would he have stored blankets and books in this old cupboard when he had perfectly good chambers to relax in?

Tom had carefully closed the door and turned to Bitsy, raising his eyebrow at her lack of response.

She had shifted uneasily on her feet. "Bitsy is telling Master Riddle, but he is not listening," she had said, sounding nervous, but also defensive.

Tom had frowned. Of course, Bitsy had come to him over and over the past few months, saying this or that about Harry, complaining endlessly about his husband's immature behavior. Tom had brushed her off. He began to wonder then, staring down at his house elf, if that had been a mistake. "Tell me now, then, Bitsy," he had said. "I promise I am listening."

"Master Harry is having his dreams, sometimes every night," Bitsy had said immediately, her words coming out in a rush, like she was worried that if she didn't speak quickly enough, Tom would lose interest and wouldn't let her finish. "He is tossing and turning and crying.

Bitsy is looking after him and putting him in the bath until he is not shaking so much, like a baby taking its first step."

Tom had stared at his house elf. "Crying?"

Bitsy had nodded.

"When did this begin?"

Bitsy had thought about his question for a long time, appearing to count on her fingers. Then she had looked up at Tom with wide eyes. "It is being three months ago, Master Riddle. Masters Harry and Riddle are having dinner with Lord and Lady Potter, and Master Riddle and Harry are exchanging words, and then Master Harry is having his first dream. He is screaming and crying. He is saying nonsense, talking of being killed, and of being dead." Bitsy had closed her eyes briefly then, shuddering.

Tom had straightened up, a bolt of unease drifting down his spine. "Three months?" he had repeated incredulously.

But then he had allowed himself to entertain the idea.

He had recalled Harry's strange behaviors. His sudden interest in the library of course, and his withdrawal, his uneasiness around Tom, and then his odd, frightened defiance. His demanding for his wand.

And Harry— he had *never* been afraid of Tom before. Had utterly despised him, sure. Harry had been awfully resentful of his freedoms being restricted. He had hated Tom's alliance with his own parents, as well as Tom's refusal to be infatuated with Harry, to fall under the young Potter heir's seduction like so many others had before.

But fear?

Crying?

(And not fake tears, the kind that Harry could muster up at any time of the day, at any moment, using his beautifully bright green tear-filled eyes and wobbly lips to get Tom to give him whatever he wanted. No— *real* tears, according to Bitsy, tears that were shed in the dark of night, underneath the bed sheets, with no one but Harry himself to deal with them until Bitsy came along.)

Yes, Tom had begun to think he had made a terrible mistake, in the hour spent searching the manor for his husband.

Perhaps he had been too harsh in his judgments. Too quick to assume the worst, to accuse Harry of the same actions he had taken in the past. Because Harry—he had clearly changed. He had been trying to be better, to do right by Tom, and after one perceived mistake, Tom had removed all of his trust.

Because after seeing Harry with his semi-regular paramour Nott—seeing that photo splashed across the Daily Prophet, being forced to see the look on his husband's face as he was

touched and pleasured by another man *yet again*—

Tom could no longer even stand to look at Harry. He had kept his time in the manor to a minimum. He had locked the library in a fit of rage, only to unlock it a few days later. And when Harry had stayed away, had kept to himself and stayed out of trouble, Tom had been relieved. He had thought that perhaps Harry's visit with his parents was what he needed to set him straight. Whatever they had discussed, perhaps they had finally gotten through to Harry.

But Tom had been wrong. That's very clear to him now, after having nearly stood by and allowed his husband to end his life in his own home, right under Tom's entirely unsuspecting nose.

He feels faintly ill and his arms tighten around Harry, who makes another sleepy sound, his body going tense and then relaxing. He mumbles something unintelligible, and he presses himself closer to Tom's chest.

"Hush," Tom says quietly. "It's alright."

He runs his fingers carefully through Harry's curls, arranging them on the pillow so they aren't scattered over Harry's face. He trails his eyes, yet again, over Harry's sallow cheeks, the deep circles under his eyes and his red bitten lips.

Tom won't let it happen again.

He's not going to allow his husband to wallow and wither away in this manor. He's going to figure out what is wrong, and he is not going to give up. Not until the colour returns fully to his husband's cheeks. Not until he finds out the truth of what happened at the party with Nott. And not until he finds a way to connect with Harry— truly, honestly, without anger or threats or imposed distance. Not until he finds a way for his husband to be happy.

Harry is Tom's husband, after all. He is *Tom's.* And Tom is not one to so easily abandon those who belong to him.

Certainly not one so precious as Harry.

Chapter End Notes

TWs: suggestive/explicit sexual language, explicit depiction of consensual sex between other-Harry/unnamed male OC, brief references to the suicide attempt of last chapter, brief references to consensual sex between Tom and other-Harry.

quick summary: Tom ruminates on the past 1.5 years of marriage to Harry. He recalls Harry's numerous illicit affairs, thinking of a specific time where he walked in on Harry with another man and then afterward, Harry made suggestive comments to Tom and attempted to seduce him.

thank you all so much as always for reading and commenting!! <3

Chapter 9: 9

Chapter Summary

a confused, yearning Tom enters from stage right

Chapter Notes

Bit of a mixture of Tom and Harry POVs in this one, along with another flashback to other-Harry. Enjoy! <3

TWs in the endnote!
Minor edits 09/02

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Harry wakes, he's cocooned in warmth.

He's drowning in soft blankets, and there is a pair of forearms wrapped tightly around him, and a corded thigh draped heavily over his hips. Harry's back is pressed all up against the other man's chest. He can feel nearly every inch of their skin touching. He breathes evenly in and out for a while, in no hurry to wake all the way up, feeling more comfortable and well-rested than he has in ages. He smacks his lips sleepily and shifts, burrowing deeper under the blankets, pressing closer to the man behind him.

(The man who is wrapped fully around him like he is something precious—something to fear losing.)

Then Harry shifts again, beginning to squirm, a bit of unease flooding through his mind. A slow awareness jogs his memory. He is remembering bits and pieces of the night before. Of him perched on the roof, his feet swaying, the way the ground had looked—And Tom, carrying him to his room, coaxing him out of his clothes. Climbing into bed with him.

Harry freezes. Behind him, Tom makes a rumbling, groaning sound and adjusts so even more of his weight is on Harry. His mouth suddenly presses, warm, against the nape of Harry's neck, and Harry shivers. He struggles some more, trying to get out from the nest of blankets, and Tom makes a disapproving sound. He pulls Harry closer and Harry is stunned to stillness when he feels—something, there, between them, pressing right up against Harry's barely-clothed arse.

It feels warm, and thick, and—Harry whimpers when Tom presses closer still, rubbing his prick unconsciously against Harry. A hot, nervous blush spreads over Harry's chest and his cheeks. Tom's mouth is still pressed to the nape of his neck. He's breathing in and out in a slow, raspy manner, his warm breath giving Harry goosebumps and making his stomach flip.

"Tom," Harry says in a muddled tone.

"Mm," Tom groans. He runs his hands over Harry's bare chest, raising more goosebumps over his hips and stomach, and then rubbing inquisitively over Harry's small, beaded nipples. Harry jerks in surprise. He feels a soft heat build in his core, a tightness in his prick, and a growing urge to press back into Tom, to squirm, to rub himself off against the sheets and—

"Harry," Tom mumbles hoarsely. "So, *so* soft. My husband, all mine…" he drags his lips painstakingly slowly over Harry's skin, humming possessively, fixating on the crook of his neck and sucking *hard,* making Harry gasp and squirm, eyes rolling back.

"Tom," he says again, his tone strangled. He gasps again when Tom's hands delve lower.

Harry has never felt this way before. What happened with Theo had been rushed, and uncomfortable, and scary. Theo hadn't listened. He hadn't known how to touch Harry, not really. Not this Harry. He had expected the old Harry. So how does Tom know how to touch him? How does he seem to instinctively know, even while half-asleep, exactly what will make Harry gasp, what will make his heart race and his prick grow achingly hard?

He had thought he would never experience something like this. It just wasn't meant for people like him, people raised to fight in a war, people destined to die. Harry had gone to meet his death at Voldemort's hand in the forest and had fully accepted that his life was over.

Tom makes another low, hungry sound, still half-conscious, and rolls his hips over Harry's. He sucks harder at Harry's neck, laving his tongue over the sensitive skin. Harry writhes beneath him, his eyes half-lidded and hot waves of pleasure spreading all over his body. "Tom," he gasps out again. He begins to feel more overwhelmed the more he wakes and gains a full awareness of what is happening. He struggles harder then, nearly thrashing, trying to push himself out from underneath his husband. "Stop," he says plaintively, his voice shaking.

Tom makes a dissatisfied sound but his grip immediately loosens. He allows Harry to climb out of the mountain of blankets and sheets without much more of a fuss.

"Harry?" he asks a few moments later, sounding dazed and confused, like he is finally beginning to come to his senses.

Harry doesn't respond. He was planning to dress himself, but there's no clothing laid out, and he doesn't see Bitsy anywhere. He's already feeling out of breath, as well, and overheated, and his veins are pulsing with a confusing, buzzing mix of fear and arousal. He finally spots his dressing gown draped over one of the chairs, and he snatches it up, tying it tightly around his waist.

Tom sits up in the bed and watches him.

“I’m sorry,” Harry blurts out. His face flushes beet-red. He avoids Tom’s eye. “I didn’t… I’m sorry.”

(He’s not quite sure what he’s apologizing for, or why he’s suddenly feeling so frightened, but he knows that Tom has spent that last few months constantly enraged with Harry over one thing or another, so he thinks his best bet now is just to apologize—even if *Tom* had been the one pressing Harry into the sheets and mouthing at his neck like some sort of wild animal.)

“Harry,” Tom says, his voice rough with sleep, sounding a bit chagrined. “You have nothing to apologize for. I am the one who…” Tom hesitates for a moment, considering his words. “I did not intend to fall asleep beside you. I should not have done that, nor should I have… taken liberties. I am deeply sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable. Had I been fully awake and in control of my faculties, I would never have… but, of course, that is no excuse.”

Harry feels his face flush even deeper. He feels unmoored. Tom has just… apologized, directly to Harry, for the first time since Harry found himself in this strange, upside-down world. It feels wrong. It feels like a trap.

“I’m… I am your husband,” he stammers out, after a long moment. “So it’s… it’s fine? I just wasn’t expecting— er, I wasn’t ready for—”

“It’s *not* fine,” Tom says. There is an edge of frustration in his tone. “I am well aware that I have not been truly welcome in your bed for quite some time. I had no intention of disrespecting those boundaries. This is your room, your private space, and I should not have taken advantage of that, especially while you did not have the capacity to turn me away.”

“Oh,” Harry says. He feels shocked by that reveal, so much so that the majority of his fear has melted away. “...Right.” He fidgets with the tie of his dressing gown and stares curiously at his husband. He had never really thought about why he and Tom had separate rooms in the manor, beyond feeling immensely relieved that he wouldn’t have to sleep beside the man. He had been worried, at first, that Tom would try to sleep with him. That he would expect some sort of sexual gratification, as was the norm for most marriages. But, no— there had been nothing of the sort. Not really any physical contact whatsoever. And Harry had never thought to question it.He wonders, now, why the other Harry had made that choice. Or—had it been Harry who drew that line? Or had it been Tom?

Across the room, still in bed, Tom sits all the way up and pushes the blankets off. He stands and grabs his own clothing, pulling on a soft-looking pair of lounge pants and then tugging a white undershirt over his bare chest while Harry blushes furiously, averting his gaze.

“How are you feeling now?” Tom asks. He moves closer to Harry, looking him up and down. “You were hypothermic.”

“I’m f- I’m fine,” Harry stammers, automatically stepping back to put space between them. Tom presses forward still, his brow furrowed, and wraps his hand gently around Harry’s elbow.

“Are you feeling cold? Any lethargy, or— irregular heartbeat, or dizziness? I have a few potions that would certainly be—”

“I’m fine,” Harry says quickly, tugging his arm out of Tom’s grasp and stepping back again, nearly stumbling. This time, Tom does not follow. He stays where he is, although his hands are clenched into fists. His eyes are unreadable.

A cold, scared feeling rolls in Harry’s stomach. He supposes this is it. Tom is definitely going to send him back to his parents, if not some kind of wizarding mental institution. He promised Harry that he wasn't going to have another chance, after all. “I wasn’t going to,” he blurts out desperately.

Tom doesn’t respond.

“I was just, erm, I needed some fresh air,” Harry presses on. He shoves his shaking hands into the pockets of his dressing gown.

“Fresh air,” Tom deadpans.

Harry nods.

“In the midst of a torrential downpour.”

Harry flushes. “Can’t get much more fresh than that,” he says, a bit of a stubborn lilt to his tone.

“Is that so,” Tom drawls, sounding a bit amused now, although his eyes are still unreadable when Harry chances to look.

“Right, so… you don’t need to…” Harry hesitates, scuffing his bare foot along the floor. “It was nothing, so you don’t need to tell my parents, or send me to the, er— the *looney bin* or something. I’m fine.” Harry’s voice starts to shake and he looks down, gritting his teeth. (He’s not really. He’s aching all over, and his head hurts, and his skin feels raw. He wants a bath, but Tom is in his room, he was in his *bed* , and now he’s looking at Harry strangely, his hair ruffled with sleep, and Harry doesn’t know what to think.)

“I’m not going to send you to the looney bin,” Tom says after a moment, sounding faintly incredulous. “That isn’t— I don’t even think they have places like that, anymore. And why on earth would I send you to one, even if there were?” he stares at Harry, raising one eyebrow.

“Dunno,” Harry mumbles, suddenly feeling a bit cross. “Seems you could send me anywhere you wanted, couldn’t you? Back to my parents like you said, or— out on the streets, maybe, or— St. Mungo’s, if you were feeling generous—”

“Harry,” Tom says, his voice gone cross, and Harry flinches.

Tom sighs. Harry watches as the man carefully unclenches his fists. “I’m sorry. I am merely trying to… communicate with you. We haven’t done that much since this union began, have we?”

Harry doesn’t respond.

Tom sighs again. He sits down on the chair beside the door and then gestures toward the bed. "Would you please sit back down?"

Harry frowns, but he does as Tom asks, sitting gingerly on the edge of the bed. He pulls one of the blankets over his lap and fidgets with it. He knows what Tom is going to ask, but he still cringes when the words come out.

"What were you *thinking?"*

Harry opens his mouth, and then closes it. He shrugs wearily.

"You could have *died,* Harry. If I hadn't—" Tom cuts himself off. He sounds half-furious, half-horrified, and a bit of guilt flips Harry's stomach. He hadn't really thought that it would matter. He hadn't thought it would affect anyone else, least of all his husband, who had seemed to not care one whit for him. But he was clearly wrong. Tom is very visibly upset, rattled, and Harry is not sure why.

"I haven't… been sleeping well," he says slowly. "I was… tired. I wasn't thinking straight, alright? That's all."

Tom stares at him.

"It's not like I…" Harry hedges, "it's not like I was actually *going to—"*

"I know what I saw, Harry," Tom says. "Please… don't try to brush this aside. I am," Tom hesitates, "I have grown weary of ignoring the issues in our marriage. It's very clear to me that you are unhappy. That you have *been* unhappy for quite some time. And I… I have also been unhappy, and as a result, I have neglected you."

"Neglected?" Harry repeats.

He shuffles further back onto the bed, worming his way beneath the blankets. Although he's only just woken, he's beginning to feel tired again, heavy fatigue weighing down his shoulders and making his eyelids droop. Harry gives into the sleepiness and lays back down, resting his cheek on a pillow and closing his eyes.

Tom is quiet for a few moments. When he speaks again he sounds closer, like he has shuffled his chair to sit right beside the bed.

"Yes, Harry," he says gently. "I have. Tell me how, if I am your husband, I have not noticed your struggling these past few months? How have I not known of the nightmares that Bitsy tells me you have nearly every night?"

Harry cringes. He curls up and turns on his side, facing away from Tom. "I'm sorry," he mumbles. "I know, they're annoying. I just can't help it. I told Bitsy I'm fine, I can handle it, but she always comes anyway and the baths really do help, so—"

"Harry." Tom reaches out and cards one hand through Harry's curls, very gently, and Harry goes still. "Please, stop apologizing. I'm not upset with you. Do you understand?"

Harry hesitates. He curls further into himself. Tom sighs. There is a creaking sound, like he is standing up from his chair, and the warm feel of his hand on Harry's head disappears. (Harry isn't quite sure whether he is disappointed or relieved about that.)

"Why don't you get some more rest. I will have Bitsy prepare breakfast in an hour or so."

Harry makes a noncommittal sound. He listens to Tom walk out of the room and quietly close the door and—only then does he feel himself fully relax. He sinks into the mattress and falls back asleep.

***

Later, when Harry has finally ventured down to the library and curled up into his usual chair, wrapped in a soft-looking blanket, Bitsy brings them breakfast.

And Tom *really* tries not to stare. He tries to keep his eyes focused on his own plate. But he can't help but watch his husband eat out of the corner of his eye. Harry is hardly touching his plate. He moves the food around, a glum, uncomfortable look on his face, only taking the occasional bite when he sees Tom looking. He looks, in fact, faintly nauseous.

"Would you like a stomach settling potion?" Tom asks quietly and Harry jumps, dropping his fork. It makes a loud, clattering sound. Harry's cheeks redden.

"A what?"

"A stomach settling potion," Tom repeats. "Bitsy has mentioned that you… have had some trouble eating, lately."

Tom watches as Harry flushes an even darker red.

"I'm just not very hungry," he mumbles.

Tom regards his husband curiously for a few moments and then holds out his hand. A small vial zooms into the room and lands on his palm. He offers the potion to Harry. Harry stares at it for a few moments, making no move to take it.

"It might help," Tom says.

"I don't think I'm allowed any magical substances," Harry says.

This time, it is Tom's face that flushes.

He recalls the fight that they had had, months before, when Tom had walked in on his husband hunched over the bathroom counter, his hands attempting to hastily hide a pile of familiar off-white powder. Harry's nose had been red, his eyes dilated and his lips parted. He had shrank back from Tom's sudden approach but then grinned.

-

"Oh, hello husband," Harry hiccups. He gestures toward the powdered drug. "Want a… want to share?"

"No," Tom says coldly.

"You sure? It's," Harry hiccups again, "it's quite nice. Feels… just like flying. Might help you pull that… that giant stick out of your arse."

"If I wanted to feel like flying, I would take my broom out for a spin. Like a normal, responsible wizard might do. Not snort powdered dragon claw like it's my first year at uni." Tom's lip curls.

Harry laughs gleefully. He raises his hand to his face, licking the lingering dust from his palm while Tom watches. "Suit yourself."

"I thought we had discussed this, Harry," Tom says through gritted teeth. He steps forward and wraps his hand around Harry's wrist, yanking it away from his mouth. "Stop that."

"Hey," Harry protests. "It's expensive stuff, alright? Let me at least get my money's worth —"

"Your money's worth? And where would you have procured the funds for something like this?" Tom laughs without humor. "I know you withdrew from my vault at Gringott's again, Harry. My account manager notified me. I am absolutely baffled at your continued audacity to abuse—"

"I could have gone to uni," Harry says, not really listening, still faintly attempting to tug his wrist out of Tom's grip. His eyes have dilated even further and Tom thinks he might have collapsed to the floor by now if he wasn't holding up most of his weight. "I tested into the upper division of… division of…" Harry sways and laughs again. "Muggle studies. Did you know that?"

Tom snorts. "What rubbish. A rich, spoiled little wizarding brat like you, studying muggles? I highly doubt that. Your father told me you nearly flunked out your last year at Hogwarts, anyway."

Harry wrinkles his nose. "Yeah, well, well… he doesn't know everything. Does he? And," Harry hiccups again, now leaning fully forward into Tom, one hand wrapping around Tom's robes. "Hogwarts was… boring. Full of stupid, poor, boring… people. Waste of time. I always told mother she should have sent me to, what was it? Beaux— Beauxb… " Harry pauses. He rubs his thumb along the soft fabric of Tom's robes. "Something—pretentiously French, wasn't it?"

"Beauxbatons," Tom says, impatient. He steers Harry over to sit on the edge of the bathtub.

"Beauxbatons," Harry repeats.

When Tom finishes vanishing the pile of powdered dragon's claw from the counter, he looks over to see that Harry has slumped backwards all the way into the tub. He is licking his hand again, almost feverishly. Tom clenches his jaw. He feels the vein in his forehead pulse. He steps forward and gathers his wayward husband into his arms, moving him from the bathroom and back into his chambers.

"You can sleep it off, and in the morning we will discuss the consequences for your actions," Tom informs him, laying him onto the bed and pulling a blanket over him.

Harry blinks up at him. "They speak French there, you know?"

"Are you listening to a single word that I'm saying?" Tom answers, growing more and more irritable by the minute. "Yes, I am well aware that they speak French at the only French wizarding school in Europe."

Harry hums noncommittally. Then his eyes widen a bit and he tries to sit up in bed. He pats his hands over his chest and then his pants pockets. "Is it already," he hiccups, "gone? I thought there were… he said it would last for—"

"It's all gone," Tom interrupts. He presses down on Harry's shoulder. "You finished the last of it. It's done. Alright?"

Harry seems discomfited, although his pupils are still horridly dilated. "But I needed… I need it, I, I can't sleep without—"

"Then you should have perhaps considered purchasing a calming draught, or a vial of dreamless sleep," Tom says curtly and his tone entirely devoid of empathy. "I suppose tonight you will simply have to make do with the lingering effects of your illicit powder."

Harry makes a disappointed sound and slumps back in the bedsheets. "Ugh."

"Don't look at me like that," Tom says when he sees Harry's eyes welling up with tears in the next moment. "You brought this upon yourself. And we are far past the point of you being able to manipulate me in such a childish manner."

Harry scowls at him. He yanks the blankets up further over his chest. "I hate you," he says. "I hate you so fucking much. You make me sick. Go away."

Tom grits his teeth. "Gladly."

-

Tom blinks back to the present and sees Harry staring at him. He curls his hand into a fist around the potion vial.

"It's a generic formula for the most common forms of stomach nausea," he says curtly, suddenly feeling flustered and a bit guilty. He thrusts it forward toward Harry. "It's non-habit forming and there are little-to-no adverse side-effects. Do you want it or not?"

Harry frowns but reaches out to take it, uncorking it and downing it in one go. The queasy look from his face vanishes and a bit of colour blooms in his cheeks. "Oh," he says, seeming a bit surprised. "That's… that's quite nice."

"Yes," Tom says stiffly. "Now, eat, please."

Harry frowns at him again but picks up his fork, stabbing it into a piece of sausage.

Tom, feeling a bit appeased now that his husband is actually eating his food and not just pretending to, allows himself to relax a bit. He sinks back in his seat. His gaze drifts, unbidden, to Harry's wrists. The man has always been smaller than average, lacking in muscle, a pitiful frame compared to Tom's. But he's sure that Harry has never been quite so…

Emaciated.

Tom's mouth twists. He casts his gaze then along Harry's protruding collar bones, his sharp cheekbones, the dark circles under his eyes. Harry's hands start to shake after a few more bites, and he curls even further into himself, ducking his head and avoiding Tom's gaze, like he is well aware of the picture he is presenting. After a few minutes he abandons his plate on the side table beside his chair.

"You haven't finished," Tom says immediately.

Harry squints at him and frowns yet again. "I'm full," he says.

"Full? You've hardly—"

“If I eat more, I will vomit,” Harry says, a hint of a bite to his tone.

“Don’t be dramatic.”

Harry flushes. He glares defiantly at Tom. “I told you I wasn’t hungry,” he says slowly through gritted teeth.

Tom’s jaw clenches. “You can’t possibly—”

Harry stands. His chair gets shoved back by the action and makes a screeching sound on the floor. His hands are curled into fists. “I’m not lying,” he says. “I’m not. I’m so fucking tired of—” his voice cracks, and his shoulders hunch. “You never listen. I’m not hungry. I told you I’m not fucking hungry. I’m— it makes me feel sick. I can’t, it’s not fair of you to force me, after you’ve spent months not giving a shit about me at all—”

“Harry,” Tom interrupts. “Please, sit down.”

Harry stares at him. “I just said that I don’t want—”

“Sit down, please, if you would,” Tom says, as gently as he can, and he watches as some of the fight drains out of his husband and is replaced by a wariness that makes Tom’s heart ache.

“I’m not trying to be rude,” Harry starts, still standing beside his chair, his words halting, his eyes lowered and his face white, his hands fidgeting together, “but I just—”

“I am sorry,” Tom says.

Harry jerks his head up. “What?”

“It was not my intention to force you to do anything. And you are right, I have not listened, and I have not been there for you. I am sorry, husband. If I push too hard, it is only because I am worried about you. I want you to eat and regain your strength.”

Harry stares at him, seeming at a loss for words.

“Now… can you stomach a few more bites, or are you truly finished?” Tom asks, inclining his head towards Harry’s half-finished plate of food.

Harry looks down at it and seems nervous. “I… I can’t,” he says quietly. “I really… I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright,” Tom says, his heart sinking. “Thank you, darling. We’ll try again later, if that’s alright with you.”

Harry sighs again and his shoulders relax a bit. He seems incredibly relieved. And finally he sits back down, sinking into his chair, and draws his knees up close to his chest. He picks up a small sketchbook and a quill and begins to scribble something on one of the empty pages.

Tom watches him. His eyes trail over Harry's messy curls, still damp from the bath this morning. Harry's brow is furrowed, the tip of his tongue sticking out of the corner of his lips and his dressing gown has slipped off one shoulder. Tom feels the ridiculous urge to come closer. He could sit right beside Harry on the chair—there's room enough for two, if they were pressed closely together, or if Tom pulled Harry onto his lap, and then he could fix Harry's dressing gown. He could make sure that every inch of Harry was wrapped in the blanket, and he could look at his sketchbook. He could see what his husband was drawing with such focus, with his brow furrowed and his knees curled up to his chest.

Harry looks up briefly, like he can feel Tom's eyes on him, and his mouth turns downward. His cheeks flush again and Tom feels unsettled at the sigh. (Has Harry always been so prone to blushing? Has he always looked at Tom that way, eyes bright and startled, hands curled into nervous fists? Have his lips always looked so red-bitten, so plush and inviting—)

"Don't you have work?" Harry blurts out, interrupting Tom's dangerous line of thought.

Tom blinks at him. "Not today," he says.

Harry frowns down at his sketchbook. "National holiday?"

"I nearly lost my husband mere hours ago, Harry," Tom says, watching with slight regret as Harry flinches and his expression immediately shutters.

"Right," Harry says, his grip around the quill so tight that his fingers have whitened. "You don't need to… to babysit me. I'm sure you have plenty of work to do, and people to see, and meetings to attend—"

"They will survive without me for the day, I am quite certain," Tom says.

Harry's shoulders slump. "Okay," he says. He presses his lips tightly together and returns his attention to the sketchbook. He seems to be quite unhappy at the thought of spending the entire day with Tom. A resounding self-hatred courses through Tom's veins then, and not for the first time since finding Harry perched on the rooftop. All of these months he's wasted, utterly consumed by rage. He had thought that Harry wanted attention, so he withheld it. If he had just taken a second to look closer, to see Harry for how he truly was instead of the image Tom had built up in his mind, he would have seen that his husband was struggling. He would never have missed such glaringly obvious, horrifying markers.

And all of those times that Bitsy had approached him with valid concerns, with solid signs of distress, he had taken them as complaints. He had brushed her off, had even ordered her to not bother him unless it was an emergency. He had professed to having 'no time,' although in reality, much of his time in the office lately had been spent sitting at his desk, staring vaguely at the wall, thinking bitterly about his husband and wondering where things had gone so horribly wrong in their marriage.

(Of course, all the while he had never considered what *he himself* could have been contributing to the problem—not just Harry.)

What an utter fool he has been.

Chapter End Notes

TWs for this chapter:
some mutually dubious/non-con touching between Harry/Tom while they are in bed together, some suggestive/explicitly sexual language, food issues, flashbacks to past sexual acts and drug abuse by other-Harry, some references to the previous suicide attempt and subsequent denial of suicidal ideations.

Chapter 10: 10

Chapter Summary

Oblivious Tom trying to be a good husband ft. a very confused and alarmed Harry

Chapter Notes

TWs for this chapter: discussion of Harry's food/eating issues, a few light/casual references to past suicide attempt, references to past canonical child abuse regarding the cupboard and food issues (the Dursleys).

Hi all, happy late valentine's day! <3 Thank you for so many kind and supportive comments on the last few chapters! I love and appreciate you all! Hope you enjoy this one :) I think it's one of my favorites!
minor edits made 8/20

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry's not sure which is more of a bother: being ignored, neglected, shoved aside to rot in his chambers, or being constantly monitored, watched, and hovered over like a newborn baby. And Tom, no longer content to leave Harry to his devices, has somehow found room in his 'very busy' schedule to spend nearly every waking moment at Harry's side, walking with him through the grounds or coaxing him to eat more and more food.

"I'm not hungry," Harry protests weakly one afternoon, his bare feet submerged in the cold water of the lake. He's rolled the bottom of his pant legs midway up his calves and his shirt is abandoned on the grass beside him. The sun beats down on his back, pressing heat through his veins and lifting his idling mood.

"Just one more," Tom says entreatingly. He's standing close, leaning down with another slice of ripe peach in his palm.

Harry has already eaten lunch, and he feels uncomfortably full. He sighs and obediently holds out his hand.

"You've lost weight these past few months. You're far too thin. It's not healthy," Tom says quietly, depositing the fruit into Harry's palm. His eyes drift then from Harry's face to his lips, then to his shoulders, his bare chest, and his ribcage. His brow furrows and his lips press into a thin line.

Harry resists the urge to cover himself, and rolls his eyes. It's been three days since what he's taken to calling his failed rooftop experiment, and—if he had known that it would lead to this kind of treatment, he might have strategized differently.

(Or strategized at all.)

"I'm fine," he insists. He shoves the slice of peach into his mouth and chews reluctantly. Tom watches him, eyes narrowed into slits like a snake. Harry shifts uncomfortably at the sight and turns his eyes back to the lazily rippling water.

Winter has finally fully arrived, Harry's sure of it, although the grounds of Riddle Manor have remained suspiciously warm and perfect for exploring barefoot. Harry wonders how Tom is managing it. He's not complaining, although sometimes when he catches a glimpse of snow through the shimmering wards, his heart pangs and he doesn't quite understand why. "I've had worse," he adds thoughtlessly.

Tom drifts closer, falling into a crouch beside Harry. His stack of half-completed paperwork —which had been his excuse for following Harry outside—lays scattered on the grass behind them, entirely forgotten. "Really?" he asks, his voice perfectly curious and light.

Harry freezes. He remembers then, with a faint sense of horror.

He remembers that this is one of those things he's not supposed to mention. The *other* Harry —the one Tom knows best, the one Harry *has* to be if he wants to survive here—is the one who was raised in wealth, who never knew hunger and never wanted for a thing.

That Harry would not have understood how it felt to be locked away in a cupboard. He would not have been accustomed to the bitterly cold, demanding gnaw of hunger in a young boy's stomach. He wouldn't have known how to deal with it like Harry does. Harry breathes in and out, carefully, and relaxes his shoulders. He forces a neutral expression onto his face. "No, I... not really, no. Er… I had a big breakfast, I mean. In the library. Bitsy made hot cocoa." He smiles weakly.

Tom had been away this morning, a rare occurrence now, apparently some work meeting he couldn't get out of. Harry had enjoyed his alone time, finally feeling for a few moments like he wasn't being hovered over like a mental patient. And there in the library, after Bitsy had finally left him alone with a tray of breakfast foods, Harry had taken the chance to peruse the shelves once more, looking for any more information that might help his research into how he got here.

(He didn't find anything, but it had felt nice to look, anyway. To flip through the pages of books about ancient spells and relics, magical scar tissue, and to not feel as though any moment, Tom would come ripping into the library and tear Harry a new one.)

"Is that so?" Tom asks, seeming unamused. "Bitsy told *me* you sent back your plate untouched this morning."

Harry shifts uneasily. He wraps his arms around himself and shrugs, swirling his feet through the water.

“Harry,” Tom gently prods after a few minutes pass in silence.

“I’m sorry,” Harry says. He avoids Tom’s eye. “I’m trying. I’m sorry. I just… wasn’t hungry.” He reaches off to the side and picks up his shirt, pulling it on and carefully doing up the buttons.

Tom sighs and sits down fully in the grass beside him. “I know,” he says. “I know. I’m not angry, Harry. I’m not—” he huffs frustratedly and scrubs his hand over his face. “I am not trying to start an argument. Merlin knows we’ve had enough of those for a lifetime. I just want you to talk to me.” He shifts closer and moves as if to place a hand on Harry’s knee, but when Harry flinches, Tom grimaces and rests his palm in the grass part way between them instead.

“I *am* talking to you,” Harry says. He stares warily down at Tom’s hand, much like one might regard a poisonous insect.

“Not really,” Tom says. “You’re still keeping things from me.” He hesitates. “You always have. From the very moment we married there has been this barrier between us, like solid stone. Unyielding. And I wish you would try being vulnerable with me for once. Just give it a chance. Let down a few walls. I know we’ve had a rough year, especially the past few months. I know you don’t have any reason to want to speak with me. But I’m here, and I am not going anywhere.”

Harry tilts his head back and squints at the sun, partially obscured by rolling clouds. He wonders what sorts of secrets the other-Harry kept from Tom. “You’re right. I’m… I’m sorry.”

Tom makes a frustrated sound. And despite his best efforts, Harry feels his hands begin to shake. He pulls his feet up out of the water and draws his knees close to his chest. He’s still not used to spending this much time with Tom every day. Having the man’s undivided attention is… disconcerting. It frightens Harry, more than he would like to admit. He is happy that Tom is no longer angry with him, but he doesn’t know how long that will last or what will happen when their shaky truce ends. He tries to stand up then, but Tom grabs his arm. Harry isn’t expecting it. He jerks back and makes a startled sound, his eyes wide, and he tries frantically to yank himself out of Tom’s grip. Tom swears a low oath and lets him go. Harry stumbles backward on the grass, landing on his arse in a bit of a sprawl before scrambling back up to his feet.

“I am not going to hurt you, Harry,” Tom says, sounding bewildered and hurt. He’s on his knees now, making no move to get up or come closer. “Certainly you must know that?”

Harry is afraid to look at him. Afraid to move. Afraid to even blink. He clenches his jaw tightly and doesn’t respond.

“Have I *ever* hurt you?” Tom asks then, sounding like he is afraid to hear the answer.

Harry feels faintly sick. He takes another step back and wraps his arms around himself. The breeze blows gently around his legs, still damp from the lake water, and he shivers. “...No,” he says after a long stretch of silence. “Of course not, Tom.”

(He very carefully doesn't think about that night after the party, or the locked library door, or the feel of his father's magic lashing over his skin, or his most recent nightmare, or the way Tom's face had hardened when he said *"consequences.")*

"So please, tell me why… tell me why you flinch from me," Tom pleads. "Tell me why you won't look me in the eye anymore. Tell me what you dream of each night that has you wake up crying."

Harry has never heard his husband take that tone of voice before. It makes him feel oddly guilty. "I… I can't," he says honestly. He sinks back down into the grass, reaching out for his shoes and socks.

Tom's jaw clenches. "Then what of the ministry party? Will you tell me the truth of what happened between you and Nott?"

Harry shudders, instantly shaking his head. A few stray curls fall over his eyes and he tucks them behind his ears. "No." He pulls one wool sock over his left foot, and then his right.

"Will you tell me why you haven't been eating?"

Harry frowns and looks down at his shoes, feeling a bit overwhelmed by all of the questions. "Well… it's only just that, whenever I tell you things, you… get angry."

When he glances up, Tom looks pained.

"I won't, Harry," he says. "I won't get angry."

"But you won't *believe* me, either," Harry says, narrowing his eyes a bit and feeling terribly bitter. He shoves his feet into his shoes and is about to stand when a shadow falls over him. He looks up and blinks at Tom's form, standing over him, one hand held out.

"Er…" Harry says, staring at Tom's open hand, palm facing up.

"You're right," Tom says, his eyes soft and liquid on Harry. "I have quite the track record of that, don't I?"

Harry's not sure how to respond. He opens his mouth and closes it.

"We can talk later. Let's go inside," Tom says. "You're shivering."

Harry blinks. He reaches up and takes Tom's hand, allowing himself to get pulled to his feet. He glances over Tom's shoulder at the mess of documents scattered all over the grass.

"But your paperwork, it's all—"

"Later," Tom says dismissively. He picks up Harry's things from the ground, the blanket he had brought out, and his sketchbook, and then he rests one hand on the small of Harry's back, guiding him into the manor. Harry, bemused, allows all of it to happen without much of a fuss. He doesn't even realise that he'd allowed Tom's hand to rest on his back all the way to the library until he's settled into his favorite chair in front of the fireplace, knees curled to his

chest, and Tom is somewhere out of sight, muttering to himself about ‘weather wards’ and ‘high-calorie nutrient potions’ and other things that Harry pretends not to hear.

And later, when Harry is half-dozing, thinking of going back up to his chambers for a nap, the embers in the fire glowing softly, Tom materializes from the depths of the library and stalks over to Harry with a determined look on his face. Harry automatically scrambles backward, his eyes darting around for the nearest exit. “I… I was just— I didn’t—”

“Have dinner with me,” Tom says. “This evening.”

Harry gapes at him. “Dinner?”

“Not here,” Tom says, shaking his head. “Let’s go out. Somewhere nice.”

“Somewhere… nice?” Harry repeats haltingly. “You mean, er… outside of the wards?” he glances out the window where he can still faintly see the glimmering outline of the wards, and beyond that, hints of a swirling snowstorm.

“We haven’t done that in a while, have we?” Tom adds, his voice soft and a bit apologetic. “Would you like that?”

Harry looks back at his husband. His hands clench into fists on his lap and he shrugs, feeling a bit bewildered and hopeful at the same time. “If that’s what you want,” he says finally says.

Tom’s brow furrows for a moment and then smooths out. “Very well,” he says, reaching down and adjusting the blanket from where it had been jostled on Harry’s lap. “Shall we say seven?”

“Okay, sure,” Harry says a bit incredulously. He watches as Tom nods and then turns on his heel, disappearing back into the bowels of the library.

***

Harry tries hard to remember how nice that dinner with Tom was, two days later when his parents come over to the manor for a visit.

The restaurant had been somewhere secluded and quiet, but cozy, in a corner of Diagon Alley he’d never seen before. Harry had been very visibly overwhelmed by the menu and so Tom

had ordered him some kind of soup that was simple, and warm, mostly broth, easy for Harry to eat even while his stomach was twisted up in knots.

-

There's soup in front of Harry now, but he can't bring himself to even try it. His mother is sitting across the table from him, her eyes fixed on Harry. She smiles at him and his throat tightens.

Seated right beside Harry, Tom shifts. Their chairs knock together. Harry glances at his husband with a nervous smile. Tom doesn't look over, but his knee brushes lightly against Harry's, and the corner of his mouth turns up. Harry feels some of the fear in his chest go quiet.

-

The lighting had been low in the restaurant, and soft, and cast delightful shadows across Tom's face. Jazzy music had played in the background while Harry worked on his soup and Tom watched him.

"This is where I came for dinner to celebrate, the evening after my appointment as minister," Tom had said in a soft, conversational tone. Harry had glanced up at him.

"Oh. It's, er, nice," Harry had said, his eyes darting around the room. "Quiet."

"Yes," Tom had said with a nod. "Closed to the general public, of course. Approved reservations only."

Harry had snorted into his next spoonful of soup.

"You find that humorous?"

"A bit." Harry had shrugged, picking up a roll and beginning to tear it into small pieces. "Just not the sort of restaurant I ever pictured myself in. Especially not with you."

Tom had leaned in close then, over the table between them. "And what sort of restaurant did you picture yourself in, Harry?"

-

His mother's fork scrapes across her plate, and Harry is jerked out of his thoughts and back to the present moment. He looks up to see Tom and his father across the room now, plates cleared, pointing at one of the documents on Tom's desk and arguing in low, muted voices. Harry looks back at his mother when she clears her throat.

"Your father and I are very proud of you," she says in a sweet, nearly simpering tone. "We saw photos of you and Minister Riddle finally making a public appearance the other night. Very well done, Harry. You looked like a perfectly respectable couple. Our son, our handsome heir, on the arm of the minister for magic."

Harry freezes.

"It's what we've wanted from the start, isn't it?" she goes on, placing a bite of food into her mouth and swallowing delicately. "A match that would help our family. That would do good for our name. Someone to help you grow out of all your childish immaturities. And you're finally starting to understand that, aren't you Harry?"

"Yes," Harry says, his mouth feeling dry. He clenches his hands into fists under the table, his eyes trained on his untouched bowl of soup.

"When is your next outing scheduled for?" she asks. "I'd like a little bit more of a warning next time. And can't you go somewhere more public? They didn't get any photos of you inside the restaurant."

Harry's chest feels cold. He smiles at his mother. "You'll have to ask Tom," he says, his tone perfectly neutral. "He handles all of the publicity, doesn't he? I just focus on being quiet, and pretty, and well-behaved."

Across the room, he suddenly feels Tom's gaze on him.

"Yes, of course, good, good," his mother purrs. "You've made me *so* happy, Harry. I'm looking forward to seeing more progress."

"Of course," Harry says, unable to stop the shiver from traveling down his spine. He lets his gaze drift back down to the bowl in front of him. His mind drifts.

-

After dinner at the restaurant, they had ordered hot cocoa. Tom had told Harry to put on his coat.

“Aren’t we just apparating back to the manor?” Harry had asked.

They were standing outside the restaurant, his nose and hands cold from the biting wind. Tom had flicked his fingers and a warm scarf and pair of gloves had materialized. “Not yet,” Tom had said, his grip gentle but firm on Harry’s wrists, guiding the gloves onto his hands and then winding the scarf very securely around his neck. Then he had held out his arm.

Harry, against everything in his head screaming to stay away, had taken Tom’s arm. The disapparation had made his stomach clench. He held tightly to Tom, stumbling slightly when they reached their destination.

“Stay close,” Tom had said, wrapping a steadying arm around Harry’s waist.

Harry let him. It had been cold, wherever they were, and light snowflakes were falling on his face and into his hair. Harry remembers shivering.

“Where are we?”

“Nowhere,” Riddle had responded easily.

Harry had looked around. There was a small town far off in the distance, thatched roofs covered in snow. Too far for him to make anything out. And further back a great lake, and white-capped mountains.

“You’re going to kill me now, aren’t you?” Harry had half-joked, his teeth beginning to chatter.

The chill was nice. After days of false sunshine, of laying on soft, warm grass and eating strips of fruit like a spoiled prince, Harry had begun to wonder if he was really still alive or if maybe he *had* taken the plunge off the roof after all and was stuck in some sort of hellish limbo, even worse than the one he was in now. He had dug the toe of his boot into the snow beneath them, taking in a deep, bracing breath and exhaling slowly.

“No,” Tom had said. “Do you think that I might?” He had turned to face Harry, a dark, pensive look in his eye.

“...sort of,” Harry had finally responded, staring back at Tom.

He really wasn’t anything like Voldemort, this Tom Riddle. He was lacking in most of the trademark snake-like features. His face was softer—more human. It was only his eyes that sometimes gave Harry pause. Or when his face would contort with anger, and for a split-second Harry would think of the horcrux from second year, the one who had stolen Harry’s wand and nearly killed Ginny.

Tom hadn't seemed surprised by Harry's response. "You seemed to want a change in weather," he had continued on without addressing the probability of his murdering Harry. "I thought you'd like a chance to enjoy the latest snowfall without the press hovering in our faces."

"Oh—right," Harry had said with a nervous smile.

Yes, he was beginning to understand that this Tom Riddle was worlds away from the Voldemort Harry had known. This Tom could be thoughtful. And respectful. And maybe even… kind.

That realization had made Harry even more uneasy. He had trudged about in the snow for a while, his boots thoughtfully transfigured by Tom to be more fully waterproof and sturdy, and an extra winter cloak layered over his dinner robes. The snow made delightful crunching sounds beneath his feet, and after a while his hair became a tangled mess of melted ice and waterlogged curls. Tom had followed a few steps behind him, sort of like a bodyguard, or watchdog, and Harry had felt slightly uncomfortable, although he was appreciative when Tom was close enough to grab the back of his robe right before he nearly stepped out onto a half-frozen pond.

"Are you cold?" Tom had murmured after a while, drifting close and looking Harry up and down.

"No," Harry had said, his voice just as soft.

"You'll tell me if you are," Tom had said, his order sounding more like a pleading request.

"Alright," Harry had responded.

***

Harry loses interest in public outings after that dinner with his parents. Not now that he knows Tom only suggested it to make an appearance—to make Lord and Lady Potter happy. Harry had enough of being a celebrity back in his old life.

(His *real* life, he still frequently has to remind himself.)

In that life, at least, people respected him. Here, he's just a dumb, rich socialite hanging on the minister's arm.

-

"How does Italian sound? For dinner?" Tom asks him a few days after that dinner with his parents.

Harry is curled up in his armchair in the library again, layered in a ridiculous amount of blankets courtesy of Bitsy. He's doodling again today, tired of reading, and the old sketchpad he found underneath one of the library shelves is flipped open to a half-complete drawing of the Burrow.

He lifts his head up and rests a neutral gaze on his husband. "Alright," he says with a shrug.

Tom frowns. "Just 'alright?' I thought we'd go out tomorrow evening. There's a nice place just outside of London."

"Whatever you want," Harry says with a hum. He looks back down at his sketchpad, his brow furrowed. Is that window in the right spot? It all looks so wonky, but that's how it was in real life too, after all. He adds in some shading and only looks back up when he hears Tom sigh.

"It doesn't matter what I want," Tom says, exasperated. "I want to take you somewhere that you'll enjoy."

"Everyone likes Italian food," Harry says, his brow scrunching in bemusement. "What's not to like about pasta?"

Tom seems even more frustrated. "Well, I —" he pauses. "Of course, but then— is there not somewhere you'd prefer to go? Some kind of food you've been craving?"

"Not really," Harry says.

"Well," Tom says again, his cheeks faintly red. "I must admit that, after more than a year of marriage, all I know about your food preferences is your love of treacle tart. And… unfortunately, we cannot subsist on that alone."

Harry snorts. He nearly smiles at Tom, the corners of his mouth lifting, his eyes creasing, and then he pulls himself back together. He grips his charcoal pencil and shrugs. "I dunno. I wouldn't mind having treacle tart for dinner," he says, feeling a bit cheeky.

Tom rolls his eyes. The corners of his mouth are twitching now, too. "I cannot, in good conscience, take my husband to dinner and not adequately feed him," he says, pushing a little

bit. “Tell me, darling. Did you not have a favourite food as a child, at least? I feel like this is something I should know.”

Harry looks down at his sketchbook, but his lighthearted mood has vanished and he feels suddenly uncomfortable.

As a child?

Harry doesn’t remember ever having a favourite food. He ate what was given to him, which was never much, and sometimes nothing at all. Harry had learned to appreciate any kind of food, and to savor every morsel, even if it was half gone bad or stale or had been thrown in the bin by Dudley. And he thinks that maybe, once or twice, the Dursleys had picked up takeout from that place on the corner that always smelled so good. Harry had pressed his face to the door of his cupboard, taking in the smells, the sweet and savory spices. It had made his mouth water, and his stomach cramp with hunger. He never got to try it, though. Not even the scraps.

“I don’t know. I don’t remember,” he says absently. He sets down his charcoal pencil and clenches his hand into a fist to stop it from shaking.

“That’s alright,” Tom says. He’s watching Harry carefully now, seeming worried, like he understands that he’s upset Harry in some way, but can’t comprehend how.

“I’m sorry,” Harry says, feeling ashamed.

“Don’t be,” Tom says. He moves across the room then, his robes rippling, and kneels in front of Harry’s armchair.

Harry goes still. He stares down at Tom with wide eyes as the man takes his hand and kisses the back of it. “What are you—”

“I need you to understand this, Harry. I am not asking you to dinner as a publicity stunt, or to please your parents,” Tom says quietly. “I just want to spend time with you. I want you to be happy.”

Harry feels a lump in his throat. His hand burns where Tom’s lips had brushed against it. “Oh,” he says, his voice rough.

“So tell me, husband. What would make you happy?”

Harry swallows hard, feeling overwhelmed. “I… I don’t…”

“Anything,” Tom says.

“I, er. I always wanted to try Indian, I suppose?” Harry says nervously, and Tom smiles.

“Indian it is,” he says. He squeezes Harry’s hand, and Harry squeezes back. “I know just the place. I’ll call ahead.”

“Is it—” Harry blurts out and then stops himself. Tom waits patiently for him to finish, still kneeling on the floor by his knees, and Harry takes in a slow breath. “I don’t like the cameras,” he admits. “I don’t… it makes me… uncomfortable. I don’t like being watched while I eat.”

“I don’t like them either,” Tom interrupts gently.

“My mother said—”

“I don’t care what your mother said,” Tom says. “She is not our publicist. Is she?”

Harry’s mouth feels dry. He shakes his head no.

“You have made a perfectly reasonable request, darling. We’ll go somewhere where we can have more privacy. And how about a few glamours, as well? Nothing too extravagant, just enough that we are not immediately recognizable.”

“Is that really okay?”

Tom looks at Harry fondly. He squeezes his hand again, the pad of his thumb rubbing over the skin of Harry’s wrist, and Harry shivers. “Of course it’s okay,” Tom says. “You could ask far more of me and I would make it happen. Do you understand?”

Harry feels hot under his collar. He meets Tom’s gaze very briefly and then his eyes dart down. His cheeks flame. “Not really,” he admits.

“You will,” Tom says, and when Harry looks up, they meet eyes again and Tom has a very dark look in his eye, almost hungry, like he wants to swallow Harry whole. He lifts Harry’s hand to his mouth again and drags his lips over the skin. *You will,* he promises again, this time in shimmering parseltongue.

Chapter End Notes

Tom: want to go outside the wards?
Harry, ears perking up like a dog: OUTSIDE?

Chapter 11: 11

Chapter Summary

Harry goes somewhere new and sees a familiar face.

Chapter Notes

this chapter was a fun one! not as dark/angsty as usual but I'll put TWs in the endnote just in case

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Even with a shaky peace now established with Tom, and things running a lot more smoothly around the manor, with less anger and biting words and cold threats, Harry's nightmares resume their regular occurrences.

And—there are nights that he wakes up not screaming, but crying. Not frightened, but instead feeling sad, and cold, and lonely, and missing his friends and his home more than anything. Nights that he remembers the way Mrs. Weasley had hugged him after the third task, her arms squeezing him tightly to her chest, and she had smelled of hazelnuts and treacle tart and warm bread and Harry had wanted to stay in that embrace forever and never let go.

He sits up in bed one of those nights, his eyes swollen with tears and his breaths stuttering. He turns toward Bitsy's expected presence and tries to arrange his face into something less miserable. "I'm sorry," he mumbles.

She stares at him shrewdly and then snaps her fingers, replacing his sweat-soaked bed clothes and sheets with a clean bathrobe. "Master Harry is having his bath now?"

Harry thinks about it and nods his head, shivering. "Okay."

The water feels nice. It always does, and Harry leans back against the cool porcelain tub, closing his eyes. Bitsy scrubs her hand through his sweat-tangled locks.

"What is wrong with Master Harry?" she asks. "He is being sad again. Bitsy is wanting him to feel all better."

Harry shrugs helplessly. He drags the tips of his fingers through the bubbly surface of water. "I know, I'm sorry. I'm trying—I really am."

Bitsy seems frustrated. “Master Harry will not be hiding in the cupboard again. He is telling Bitsy what is wrong.”

Harry shifts and draws his knees up to his chest with a sigh. The water sloshes around him. “I dunno, Bitsy. I’m just,” Harry searches for words, “sad. People get sad sometimes, don’t they?”

She stares at him with wide, confused eyes, her floppy ears twitching. “Bitsy is making Master Harry angry again, and then he is jumping off the roof,” she says tentatively.

Harry grimaces and ducks his head. “I’m not going to do that, Bitsy. And it wasn’t your fault anyway. You were trying to help, I know. It was just… a bad night.”

Bitsy scrubs his shoulders with a warm washcloth and he closes his eyes, soaking in the comforting touch.

“If Master Harry is deciding to throw himself from the roof again,” she adds, sounding unconvinced, “he is not likely to be getting past Master Riddle’s new wards. But if he *is,* he is telling Bitsy *right away* and she is putting a cushioning charm on the ground beneath him.”

Harry laughs at the sudden image in his head.

“Master Harry must promise Bitsy.”

“Alright, Bitsy. I promise.”

Harry climbs out of the bath after a while and Bitsy helps him back into his pyjamas. He burrows into his bed, buried beneath his numerous bedsheets, and sighs, feeling much better.

“A sleeping draught for Master Harry tonight?” Bitsy prompts, holding out the small vial in her hand.

“No, thank you,” Harry says, after considering the potion for a moment. “It’s not, er… it’s fine.”

“Master Riddle is permitting it,” Bitsy says earnestly. “Is Master Potter forgetting? He needs the potion to sleep, and if he will not speak to a mind healer, and if he will not let Master Riddle sleep in his bed to keep him safe and warm then he must be taking his medicine at the very least, does Master Harry remember? Bitsy will go and fetch Master Riddle, if Master Harry is changing his mind, if he is wanting to curl up in the blankets with his husband and —”

“No,” Harry says quickly, his face flushing a deep red. He snatches the potion from Bitsy’s hand, ignoring her knowing smirk. “No, Bitsy. Thank you, yes I remember. It was very nice of Tom to, erm... offer. But—I’d prefer to sleep alone. Okay?”

Bitsy narrows her eyes at him and seems unconvinced.

“Master Harry is taking the sleeping draught if he is needing it,” she orders him, and Harry sighs.

“I will. Don’t worry, Bitsy. I’ll be fine.”

She narrows her eyes even more and points a gnarled finger at him. “Cushioning charm,” she warns again, waiting to see Harry’s nod of understanding before leaving the room.

***

Time passes, and Harry adjusts. He continues trying to keep himself alive and to be a good husband. At least, good enough to make Tom happy and keep his parents off his back.

Tom takes him to dinner once or twice a week, and sometimes Harry even finds that he enjoys himself, especially when they go to places that aren’t swarming with photographers.

On those occasions it feels almost like he and Tom are a happily married couple out for a nice evening together, married because they love each other and *not* for the purpose of social climbing, or money, or control, or one of the other terrible reasons behind why they *actually* married.

And on those nights Harry allows himself to pretend, a bit.

He pretends that he is Harry James Potter, wealthy heir of James and Lily Potter. He pretends that he is the supposedly lazy, spoiled playboy that graduated Hogwarts by the skin of his teeth and then was married off to Tom Riddle, the minister of magic, three years later. Harry pretends that yes, perhaps they had a difficult start, a rough go of marriage so far but who hasn’t? And he imagines that by now they’ve begun to overcome their issues and have even grown rather fond of each other.

And sometimes, when Harry looks up from his plate and sees Tom looking at him, his eyes liquidy and soft, his lips quirked in an easy smile, Harry allows himself to pretend that he could be happy here. That he could stay in this world, live in Riddle manor forever, reading books and sketching and baking pies with Bitsy. Tom would never have to find out about Harry’s past, or the world he came from, and he would never have to hear anything about Voldemort, or Death Eaters, or Horcruxes. And Harry would never have to think about those things ever again, either. They would fade into distant memory, nothing more than an uncomfortable itch in the back of his mind when he woke at night, frightened and sad but no longer certain of why.

Of course, Harry’s imagination can only take him so far. And Harry, so much as he might long to forget everything difficult or sad or painful that has happened to him in this life or his

other, cannot seem to let go.

And each time Lily and James visit the manor for dinner Harry stares carefully at the wall, or at his lap, and focuses on the feel of Tom's thigh brushing ever-so-slightly against his own. He tries to not think of the hot sting of the lash, his father's fury, or his mother's chilling hands pressing magic into his back.

He still doesn't know, not really, whether Tom knew what was going to happen when he sent Harry to see his parents that night. He doesn't know whether Tom thought he deserved it. And everytime he tries to force himself to ask, to broach the subject, he can't get the words out. He's afraid to hear what the answer will be.

But—as long as he's good, as long as he behaves, as long as he's careful and doesn't make any mistakes, Harry's sure he won't have to go through that again.

***

"Come to work with me," Tom says late one evening when Harry is dozing, sprawled across a loveseat in Tom's office.

He doesn't venture there very often, not liking the small space and how close he has to sit to his husband. He finds it much harder to relax than he might in the library or the kitchen or the grounds. But it's a nice office, warm and clean, and there is always soft music playing, a fire crackling in the furnace and an all-encompassing view of the estate from the large paned window behind Tom's desk.

Harry has a blanket spread across his lap, bare feet dangling just close enough to the furnace to feel the extra warmth. His sketchbook lies abandoned to the side, a half-complete drawing of Hagrid's hut below a detailed sketch of the Whomping Willow.

"Hm?" he says, half-listening.

Then there is the soft sound of rustling papers. Harry blinks sleepily and shifts, his sketchbook falling to the floor. He looks up to find that Tom is staring at him from his desk with a soft, amused look on his face.

"Come to work with me," he repeats. "Tomorrow. If you'd like."

Harry sits up. He grips the blanket and tugs it more tightly around himself. "Sorry?"

Tom chuckles warmly. He gets up from his seat and walks around the desk. Harry tries to gather his bearings in time to figure out what Tom's talking about, but before he can, Tom is bending over and scooping Harry off the couch, one arm supporting his back and the other beneath his knees.

"Oh," Harry mumbles, his face feeling hot. He squirms slightly but Tom only tightens his hold.

"I'll have Bitsy wake you in the morning," Tom says quietly as he carries Harry out of the library, through the halls and back to his chambers. "I think it will be nice. You haven't visited my office in quite some time."

"Er," Harry says, stifling a yawn. "Alright? If that's what you want."

He's already drifting off to sleep before he hears Tom sigh.

-

The ministry is bigger than Harry remembers. He sticks close to Tom and stares around them with wide eyes.

This early in the morning, the arsenal of fireplaces have not yet begun to flood with the arrival of the daily workforce. They walk down the long corridor mostly alone but then— Harry catches a flash of dark red in the corner of his eye and realizes that at some point during the commute, they've been encircled by a team of six aurors.

"Their presence is required when we're inside the ministry," Tom explains when he notices Harry's bemused look.

"Oh," Harry says. "Are we, er… in danger?" His cheeks flame as he thinks about it. Of course, Tom is the minister of magic. It would make sense to have bodyguards. But Harry doesn't remember seeing any of them at the ministry ball either.

(If they had been there, couldn't they have stopped Draco from whisking Harry off into that dark corner?)

"Certainly not," Tom responds. "It's a formality. A display of ministry power and control. Should any threat arise, whether significant or minor, I am more than capable of protecting us. I dismiss them as often as I can. But it is best to present an overall appearance of strength while here at the ministry."

“Oh,” Harry says again. He peers over his shoulder at the three aurors pacing behind them. Although he knows it’s wishful thinking, he finds himself looking for a familiar face. He thinks of the Order of the Phoenix and his heart aches.

None of them even look vaguely familiar. They stare back at him with blank expressions, eyes darting frequently between him and Tom and the corridor surrounding them.

“And Harry— I am not anticipating this, of course,” Tom adds, “but were we to become separated for any reason, you may depend on the aurors to protect you. As my husband, and as the only son of Lord and Lady Potter, your face is very well known here, and I am not without enemies who would jump at the chance to harm me or those close to me. I don’t ever want you to be alone here, Harry. Certainly not without your wand.”

Harry’s calm, nearly happy mood instantly sours at the mention of his wand and he clenches his hands into fists, mouth drifting into a frown. “Right.”

-

Harry quickly realizes that he has no idea what the minister of magic actually *does* .

Tom spends much of the morning behind a gigantic desk, brow furrowed, mouth a permanent frown, sorting stacks of papers and muttering to himself. There is a constant stream of memos delivered into a bin at his side, most of which Tom ignores, or briefly looks over and then rolls his eyes. Occasionally he’ll snatch one out of the air, scribble something onto it, and send it away with a flick of his fingers.

Harry doesn’t quite know what to do with himself. He settles uneasily into a large maroon armchair in the corner of the office. He sets his bag on the floor by his feet. Bitsy packed it for him—there's lunch in there for him, he knows, as well as a few books, his sketchbook, and an extra soft cashmere sweater.

(It would be embarrassing, the way Bitsy has grown so comfortable treating Harry like a child to be looked after, if it weren’t for the fact that it makes his cheeks warm and brings him a source of comfort he has not often been allowed to feel.)

Harry watches Tom work for a while. It’s an hour or so into the morning when there’s a brief knock on the door and—

A shockingly familiar head of bushy hair enters the room.

Harry gapes at the sight of his best friend, one of the the people he was certain he would never see again, in complete and utter shock. He’s not entirely sure if he’s dreaming.

Hermione Granger walks right up to Tom’s desk and sets down a bit of parchment.

Harry jumps to his feet, his book tumbling off his lap to the ground. He can hardly breathe. His fingers twitch with the need to run to her, to sink into her arms and laugh and cry and talk about everything that's been happening.

She appears startled as well, turning to face him after his sudden movement, and her eyes widen with discomfort. "Ah. Good morning Mr. Potter," she says politely with a quick dip of her head, avoiding his eyes.

She looks exactly like *his* Hermione, if maybe a few years older, and her hair and clothes slightly more professional. Harry feels his eyes brimming with tears and he sways in place, drinking in every detail of her appearance, speechless and nearly lightheaded.

Hermione seems uncomfortable with the attention and turns her body slightly to face Tom, adjusting her skirt and clearing her throat.

"Erm, right, so… Good morning, sir. I have your itinerary for this afternoon here, and I've highlighted each meeting for the day as well as included details on the topics and everything you might need to know."

"Thank you, Miss Granger," Tom says calmly, his eyes darting curiously toward Harry for a brief second. He looks back to Hermione and gives her a nod of approval, looking over the paper she's handed him. "Excellent work, as usual. Will you be taking lunch this afternoon?"

She hesitates briefly and then nods. "Of course, sir. Between your first and third meetings, I've marked it on the calendar. Unless you've something for me to do?"

Tom chuckles and shakes his head. "No, certainly not. I was only thinking that perhaps Harry might like to join you? He's spending the day with me but I'd imagine he's growing quite bored of sitting around in my office and watching me read memos."

Harry thinks he sees Hermione stiffen slightly, a barely perceptible hunching of her shoulders, but she smiles and nods. "Of course, Minister Riddle." She turns to Harry. "I usually take lunch at my desk, but we could go somewhere nicer if you'd prefer?"

Harry shakes his head hastily, his heart still pounding. He can hardly speak without his voice shaking. "No, er," he stumbles over his words, "that sounds fine. I mean, erm, perfect, actually. Whatever's easiest for you, Herm— Granger." Harry realizes he's still standing and he finally sinks back into his chair, an embarrassed blush rising up the side of his neck.

"Perfect," Tom says, his eyes darting between Hermione and Harry. "Thank you, Miss Granger. That will be all."

Hermione nods and gives a strained-looking smile before turning and leaving.

The room falls into a tense silence. Harry sinks even further into his seat and bends down to pick up his fallen book, trying to avoid Tom's curious gaze.

"How interesting," Tom finally remarks.

Harry ducks his head. He doesn't respond.

“You seem rather excited to spend lunch with my assistant, Harry.”

Harry frowns and shrugs. He casts about for a plausible explanation that won’t make him sound certifiably insane. If he plays his cards right, maybe Tom will let him spend more time with Hermione. As long as he doesn’t think she’s a bad influence.

“I guess… it’s just nice to see another person for a change,” Harry says, keeping his tone as cool and even as possible. “Considering how long I’ve been confined to the manor, I think I would be excited to see anyone at this point.”

Tom flinches almost imperceptibly, and Harry cringes, waiting to be berated, but his husband only sighs. “Right,” Tom says. “That is… yes, I understand. Well, I expect you’ll enjoy spending lunch with her, then.”

“Yes, I suppose I will,” Harry answers.

Tom seems faintly pleased, at that. “Why don’t you tell her how you’ve taken to reading these past few months? That will likely spark conversation. She seems to be quite… bookish.”

Harry bites back a fond grin, his heart twisting with bittersweet emotion. “Okay, I will. Thanks.”

This isn’t his Hermione, of course, and Harry will have to remember that so he doesn’t slip up again and make Tom more suspicious. But… maybe she could still be his friend? She doesn’t seem to like him for some reason, but Harry thinks that maybe he can win her over. There’s no giant troll in the girl’s bathroom for him to defeat, but he’ll think of something.

-

It turns out that not only does Hermione not like Harry *at all,* but she appears to be afraid of him. Or at the very least, extremely uneasy at his presence. She jumps when Harry ventures out of Tom’s office a few hours later.

“Oh,” she says, resting a hand over her chest. “Right. That. Okay.” She points to an armchair adjacent to her desk and Harry walks over, taking out his lunch and resting it on his lap.

“Thank you,” he says, feeling awkward, knowing that he’s staring and being strange but he can’t help it.

Looking at Hermione is like looking at home. Harry feels a painful lump rise in his throat and he clears it, looking down at the container of green apple slices Bitsy has packed him.

“No need to thank me,” Hermione says primly. “It’s part of the job.”

Harry frowns. He studies Hermione a little more closely and sees, again, the harsh line of her shoulders, the tight set of her mouth and the slight tremble of her fingers. She has a ham sandwich out on her desk but has made no moves to consume it. Her eyes flick up to eye him warily every few minutes.

“I’m sorry,” Harry says after he can’t take the tension anymore. “Have I… er. I don’t seem to have the best memory lately. Have I done something to offend you?”

Hermione’s eyes flash with incredulity. She stares at him like he’s just said something terribly stupid. “Of course not, Mr. Potter.” A dark, angry blush starts to spread up from her neck to her cheeks.

Harry shifts in his seat and picks at one of the apple slices. His stomach flips with discomfort and he sets it back down.

“Right. Well, it just seems like you, er, you’re upset about something?” He cringes and then plows on. “I’m sorry to take up your lunch hour. It was Tom’s idea, but we don’t have to, erm… do anything? I’m not expecting to be… entertained. And I don’t want to mess up your schedule. You seem, er. Busy?”

Hermione scowls at him, and her voice is stiff and aloof when she answers with— “how could I be upset about anything? I’m only Minister Riddle’s secretary, after all. My job is meaningless. All I do every day is sit here and daydream about how nice it would be to become the minister myself. I’ll do whatever it takes, even if I have to sleep with your husband.”

Harry flinches. He feels the blood drain from his face.

“That’s what you said, isn’t it?” Hermione continues on, a vicious edge to her tone. “There must be *something* going on between us, right? Because why else would I get this job? Certainly not because of oh I don’t know,” she begins to count on her fingers, “my numerous qualifications and accolades, my years of experience working in politics post-Hogwarts, and my deep understanding of the nuances between muggles and wizards. An understanding that Riddle *specifically* requested in the job posting.” She grins at Harry like a shark. “But what do I know? I’m just paid to sit here and take notes and order coffee.”

Harry’s heart drops.

Of course, the other Harry has already ruined this relationship for him too.

What hasn’t he done? If Hermione exists here, does that mean there could be others? But is there anyone in this world who doesn’t already know of Harry, of the things he’s done? Of what kind of person he is?

(*Was,* Harry reminds himself.)

“Hermione, I’m s—”

“Don’t bother,” Hermione sneers. “You don’t scare me. If you could get me fired, you would have done it ages ago. I answer to Minister Riddle and no one else. Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to eat my lunch. I have a busy afternoon planned and don’t have time to play your mind games or deal with any more accusations.”

Harry is speechless. He falls back into his seat, stunned, watching as Hermione takes a vicious bite from her sandwich. With her free hand, she scribbles something onto a piece of parchment.

His appetite, little as it usually is, is completely gone. He spends most of the remaining time just watching Hermione, thinking, trying to figure out what he can say to fix this. If he has to go back to the manor knowing that his only friend in the world is worse than a stranger to him, Harry doesn’t know if he’ll make it through the night.

“I was wrong,” he finally says, his voice shaking slightly.

Hermione looks up at him and pauses in her work. “Sorry?”

“I was wrong,” Harry repeats. “Whatever I said, however I treated you, I’m—I’m sorry. It was wrong. Of course you’re qualified for this job. *More* than qualified. And you *should* be the minister, honestly. You deserve it. You’re the smartest witch I know, and—”

“What are you playing at?” Hermione says with a scowl.

“I just, erm, I’m really sorry, Herm—Granger. Miss Granger.” Harry coughs nervously. “I can see that I’ve acted quite terribly toward you, and you didn’t deserve that. I know I can’t… I can’t take it back, but please, can’t we start over? I’d really like to try being your friend.”

“My *friend* ?” Hermione nearly spits out the words. Her eyes are like flames. “That’s rich. After how you’ve treated me? Just how stupid do you think I am?”

“I don’t,” Harry pleads. “I don’t think you’re stupid at all, Hermione, I just want to—”

“Stop calling me that,” she snaps, and Harry freezes. “Now listen. I’ll babysit you if Minister Riddle asks, but I’m certainly not going to be your friend. Now why don’t we just sit here quietly and pretend to have a nice time, and then afterward you can go back to your husband and bat your eyelashes and try to get me fired.”

Harry begins to feel nauseous. His eyelids flutter and he nods faintly. “Okay,” he says softly.

***

And that night, Harry is curled up in the library with a blanket, feeling too numb to read or draw, when Tom stands up from his desk and kneels down in front of the couch at Harry's knees.

Harry goes perfectly still.

"What is wrong, husband?" Tom asks softly. He takes one of Harry's hands in his. He rubs his thumb along the skin of Harry's inner wrist.

"Nothing," Harry says after a prolonged moment, staring down at Tom's hand.

"I thought you'd enjoy getting out of the house, but ever since we returned you've been positively morose. Did something happen? Did one of my assistants dare to—"

"I'm fine," Harry interrupts him in a dull tone. He tries to tug his hand out of Tom's grip but he holds fast.

"Did Miss Granger say something? Perhaps I shouldn't have suggested that you dine together. It was only that I know she is closer to your age, and I hoped that you might—"

"She didn't do anything," Harry insists, his throat starting to seize up again. He avoids Tom's eye. "It's fine. I'm just tired."

"Hmm." Tom seems unconvinced. He shifts closer, adjusting the blanket on Harry's hip and looking him over. His lips purse. "Did you finish the lunch Bitsy made you?"

"Yes," Harry lies.

"I'll have her send up some hot cocoa and biscuits."

Harry's eyes raise to meet Tom's. "I'm not hungry."

"I know," Tom says gently, his eyes soft.

Harry swallows hard. He forces himself to look away again. "Don't you have work to do? I thought you didn't have time to worry about me and my temper tantrums." He jerks back in surprise when a plate of steaming hot cocoa and chocolate biscuits materializes on the table next to the couch.

"I shouldn't have said that," Tom says, still in the same very gentle tone. "You are my husband. I always have time for you."

Harry doesn't know why, exactly, this is the comment that pushes him over the edge. His breath hitches, his face crumples, and he feels heavy, hot tears start to spill down his cheeks.

"Harry," Tom says, concern lining his features. He comes in close and wraps an arm around Harry, tucking him against his chest. Harry, for reasons he can't quite put into words, allows

the contact to happen without much of a fuss. He tucks his head against Tom's robes and tries to stop crying without success.

"I'm sorry," he sobs. He feels Tom's arms tighten around him.

It's been a long time since Harry's been held like this. Not since that cold, rainy night, when Tom brought him inside off the roof and kept him warm.

Harry cries until his eyes feel tender and swollen, his chest aching, and some of the uncomfortable sadness he's been feeling all day since encountering Hermione has eased slightly. He sighs deeply, rubbing his eyes and hiding his gaze from Tom.

"Will you tell me what's wrong, now?" Tom asks.

Harry cringes.

"Please, Harry. I'm here. I promise I will listen, if you would just— please, talk to me."

Harry takes in a deep, shaking breath. "Okay. I think that maybe I'm just…" he swallows thickly and forces himself to continue, "I feel, sort of erm… lonely."

Harry squeezes his eyes tightly shut. It's scary to admit what he's truly feeling, but it's getting harder and harder to keep everything locked down inside. The Harry he is now is so far from who he was during that final battle with Voldemort. He's not that Harry anymore, nor is he anything like the Harry from this world.

At the moment, Harry's really not quite sure who he is at all.

"Oh," Tom says, and he seems slightly startled, like this isn't at all what he was expecting Harry to say.

"I'm sorry," Harry says again, his breath choked on another shaky sob. He turns his head to the side and scrubs furiously at his eyes. "I know you think—you think I'm so childish. Please… don't be angry. I'm just having a bad day. It's fine. I'm fine." He takes in a deep, shuddering breath, and tries to push out of Tom's arms, feeling like he's overstayed his welcome, but Tom won't give him an inch.

"Why would I be angry?" Tom says, sounding bewildered. The fire crackles, a piece of hot ember spitting onto the stone flooring near their feet.

Harry half-shrugs.

"Please, Harry. Please talk to me."

"I'm… I am trying to be good," Harry speaks haltingly, his tone hoarse. "A good… a good husband for you, it's just h—" he pauses. "It's hard sometimes. I know it's not fair to you or Bitsy. But I can handle it, I can do better, please, just let me handle it. You don't need to—to tell my parents, or—"

“I’m not going to call your parents to complain that you’re finally confiding your feelings to me about something for the first time since we said our vows,” Tom says sharply, and Harry flinches. He tries to scramble off of Tom’s lap (how did he end up there?) but Tom’s arms are like iron bars around him.

“Let go of me,” Harry says. He feels his arms start to tremble, his breath coming out even more uneven.

“You’re shaking, now,” Tom says. He sounds frustrated. “Why? Are you truly still frightened of me? I don’t understand what I could have done to make you tremble and quake with fear at my mere proximity. Even if I were furious, I would never lay hands on you with the intent to cause harm.”

“I’m not scared of you,” Harry protests weakly.

He thinks briefly of his father, of the lashes, the blinding hot pain, but he pushes the thought away. He can’t afford to think about that now.

“Yes, you are,” Tom says. He shifts so that he’s sitting on the ground with his back to the couch, Harry still tucked onto his lap with no hope of escape.

The fire is closer now, and it warms the back of Harry’s sweater. And somehow, despite his discomfort from being so close to Tom, he feels a sleepy, fuzzy feeling start to spread over him.

Tom seems to sense the fight melting out of Harry. He lets him fall silent without demanding more of a response, and their conversation comes to a halt. Harry listens to the sound of Tom’s heartbeat through his robes, a steady thumping that quiets his own racing pulse. His breaths become even and slow, and he slumps down further into Tom’s hold, his eyes fluttering shut.

“...maybe I am,” he finally hums, seconds or minutes later, as he feels himself sinking into a warm, hazy half-sleep. He knows that no one will bother him here. No one can reach him from within Tom’s grasp.

“Pardon?”

“Maybe I am… scared of you,” Harry yawns and then shivers. He presses his cheek to the rough fabric of Tom’s robe. “...a bit.”

“Tell me why?”

Harry hums. He breathes deeply in and out, his shoulders slumping.

“Harry.”

“Well, you… you sort of… killed me,” Harry mumbles. “Didn’t you?”

He’s so tired. Tired of living in this world where his arch nemesis is his husband, his parents are worse than the Dursleys ever could have hoped to be, his only friend is a house elf, and

he’s not allowed to hold a wand. Harry’s thoughts start to half-drift into the dream world, even as Tom goes still around him.

“What?”

Harry hums, shifts slightly, but doesn’t elaborate.

“Harry—what did you say?”

But Harry is too far asleep by then, too drowsy to comprehend what he’s just said to his husband. He makes an unintelligible sound and nuzzles closer to Tom.

Chapter End Notes

TWs: discussion between Bitsy & Harry of past suicide attempt, brief references to corporal punishment from previous chapters.

Thank you for reading, and for so much continued support!! <3

Chapter 12: 12

Chapter Summary

> Harry runs into another old friend, talks to snakes, makes a curious discovery, and finally has a real conversation with his husband.

Chapter Notes

> TWs in the end note!
> Everyone has been so nice about me going off anon, I don't know why I was so afraid lol. you guys are amazing! thank you for all the support and for so, SO many kind comments!! I promise I read every single one and I am working through responding to them!
>
> Also: I know that in canon, Harry loses his Parseltongue abilities when he loses the horcrux (?) soo, I don't really have anything to say for myself. I just love when Harry talks to snakes. Let's all pretend that the Parseltongue remained as a permanent side-effect of Harry having a horcrux in his head for 17 years. And just don't think too hard about it. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry feels better the next morning when he wakes to find himself alone in his bed, wrapped in blankets and a tray of breakfast tea waiting on his nightstand. He sits up and stretches, scrubbing a hand over his face and through his hair. He feels that odd sort of lightness that you can only feel after a good cry. And after Harry climbs out of bed and pulls on his outfit for the day, he realizes that he slept without any nightmares for the first time in perhaps months.

Bitsy pops into the room and smiles at Harry, her eyes crinkling.

“Master Harry is sleeping through the night,” she announces proudly, as if Harry weren’t already aware. He smiles wryly and refrains from rolling his eyes.

“Yeah, Bitsy, thanks. Hopefully I’ll make it to two nights in a row this time.” He crosses his fingers and winks at her.

“Master Riddle is saying Master Harry is to be going out today,” Bitsy adds, ignoring him.

Harry perks up. “Going out? Where?”

She shrugs, and Harry bites back a grin. Bitsy likes to make fun of his casual mannerisms, but he's noticed her behaving more like him day by day.

"Out," she repeats. "Master Harry is going out and making friends and enjoying himself."

Harry freezes, and a mortified blush rises over his cheeks. He suddenly recalls some of what happened the night before, including his tearful confession of loneliness.

"Oh," he says, now feeling a bit hesitant. "He said that?"

It feels very nearly like a punishment, or some kind of test, although Harry's not sure if Tom meant it that way. But where is he supposed to go? What is he supposed to do? Harry is still as good as a newborn babe in this world.

Bitsy nods, seemingly unaware of his conflicting thoughts. "Yes," she says, sounding proud of him. "Master Harry is being a good husband! Master Riddle is trusting him."

Harry flushes even deeper. "I don't… I dunno what he expects me to do," he stammers out. "Where am I to go?"

Bitsy stares at him. "Master Harry is not knowing where to go?" she asks, an odd look in her eye as she drifts closer to him. She seems confused. "Bitsy is thinking shopping is Master Harry's most favorite activity, when he is not being in trouble."

"Shopping?" Harry repeats.

"Clothes, and shoes, and bags, and soft sweaters, and chocolates, lotions, and sweet smelling perfumes!" Bitsy says, clapping her hands together and looking at Harry expectantly. "All of Master Harry's favorite things, of course."

Harry supposes that he shouldn't be surprised, after all. Having seen the contents of his personal bathroom, and the size of his wardrobe, and based on the comments made constantly by Tom and his parents, the other Harry clearly had expensive taste and didn't hold back.

"Er," Harry says, perching on the edge of his bed. "Okay? But I don't… I don't really want to go by myself," he finally admits.

"Master Harry will be accompanied by an auror, of course," Bitsy nods sagely. "Master Riddle is requiring it."

Harry grimaces. Those faceless, nameless aurors from the other day? The thought is almost worse than when he thought he would be shopping alone. "Well… alright, fine, but— what about you?" Harry brightens up suddenly. "You can come with me too, right?"

The room falls into utter silence and Harry's smile falters. Bitsy is staring at him in complete shock.

"Master Harry cannot be suggesting this," she finally says.

Harry studies her for a moment. "Yes, I am."

Her look of shock turns to horror. “No. No! It is not proper!” She starts to fidget with the edge of her robe and her ears twitch in alarm.

“Please,” Harry wheedles. “I don’t care what’s proper. Please don’t make me go by myself, Bitsy.”

“But of course, the auror, he is—”

“But I need— I need a friend,” Harry interrupts. He gazes at the house elf entreatingly and shifts nervously on the edge of the bed. “Not a bodyguard. *Please,* Bitsy. Just for today? It’s been so long since I’ve gone out, and I just… Tom doesn’t like any of my other friends, and I don’t want to see them, anyway. Please come with me? I need you.”

Bitsy’s shoulders slump and she nods reluctantly. “Master Harry is insisting, and Bitsy is going with him. She is not wanting him to and invite the nasty Malfoy boy instead.”

She doesn’t sound excited, and Harry feels slightly bad, but not enough to take it back. He grins at her and jumps to his feet.

***

Florean Fortescue's is probably not somewhere the old Harry liked to go, based on Bitsy’s incredulous reaction to being inside the brightly-lit ice cream shop. Harry doesn’t care. This was supposed to be a fun day for him, and he was willing to endure each of the high-end clothing shops that Bitsy dragged him to, so he thinks he deserves this.

His parcels of new sweaters and pants and hair creams and lotions and perfumes are on the ground near his feet, shrunk to fit inside one brown paper bag. Harry avoids looking at it. He doesn’t even know how much it all cost, but it was definitely more than he ever spent on himself back in his old life. The merchants hadn’t even charged him in person—they just sent the bill straight to Gringotts.

Harry had thought that was a little ridiculous, but Bitsy had narrowed her eyes at him in warning so he had kept quiet.

She perches across from him on the stool now, a waffle cone filled with chocolate ice cream in her hand. It looks comically large next to her head, and her ears flop side to side as she tries to stop it from dripping onto the table.

Harry works on his own cone in silence, his thoughts drifting lazily back and forth. He never knew that shopping could be so tiring. Bitsy had wrinkled her nose at his flavor of choice (strawberry and peanut butter) but Harry knew that's what he wanted before they even stepped in the door. With how different this world seems day after day, Harry has to take the small similarities as they come.

One difference, of course, being the auror standing silently outside the door of the shop. Harry glances at him out of the corner of his eye again and sighs.

It feels odd, being followed around. It gives him a nervous, itchy feeling. And he doesn't like the way the auror looks at him, like he's a flight risk, like at any moment he could run into the alley and have wild sex with a stranger.

As if the auror could pick up Harry's negative line of thinking, he suddenly straightens up and walks inside the shop, striding over to where Harry and Bitsy are still working on their ice cream. Harry stiffens and prepares himself for whatever is about to happen.

"Mr. Potter," the auror nods at Harry without sparing Bitsy a glance. He's tall, with brown hair and a thick beard. An impressive number of scars line his forearms, although Harry is sure that Moody would have him beat.

"Er, hello," Harry answers him. He surreptitiously wipes his mouth, hoping there's no remnant of strawberry syrup lingering on his lips.

The auror takes out his pocket watch and regards it briefly before nodding and putting it away. "I have a prior engagement, and informed Minister Riddle as well as the head auror of my planned exit. Auror Weasley will be relieving me for the remainder of the day. He should be here in approximately—"

There's a soft pop of apparition just outside the shop, and a whirling of red robes and—

Ginger hair.

Harry's heart clenches.

"Auror… *Weasley* , did you say?" he repeats faintly.

He watches in disbelief as another one of his *best friends in the whole world* adjusts his robes, tucks his hair behind his ear and strides toward the building.

"Yes, of course," the auror says, glancing outside and seeming impatient. "And it looks as though he's just arrived. Will you have need of anything else before I take my leave, Mr. Potter?"

Harry is still staring slack-jawed out the window at Ron when he jerks upright and registers the auror's question. "Erm, sorry—no. We'll be alright, I think. Thank you."

The auror nods at him again and then sees himself out of the shop without another word. Ron meets him at the door and they exchange a few brief words before Ron nods solemnly, and the other auror stalks down the street and out of sight.

Harry is frozen in his seat. He can feel melted ice cream dripping over his hand and onto the already-sticky table. His heart beats faster and faster as he watches the devastatingly familiar redhead approach their table.

This is not the same Ron that I remember, he reminds himself firmly. *Not this Ron. This is a stranger.*

Still, his heart twists with a bittersweet ache as Ron comes closer and his face breaks into an easy grin. He nods at Harry and smiles politely at Bitsy.

"Hullo there," Ron says. "Mr. Potter, and…"

"Bitsy," Harry supplies helpfully, his heart in his throat.

"Bitsy," Ron repeats, his grin widening. "Right, pleasure to meet you both, of course."

"Erm," Harry stammers, "yeah, you too, mate. I mean—er, it's nice to meet you."

Ron doesn't seem to notice Harry's casual language, or doesn't register the oddness of it, because he plunges onward without hesitation.

"I'm the newest face on the force," he says casually, although his cheeks redden slightly, as if he knows that he has something to prove. "Minister Riddle didn't want any rookies on guard duty for you, but we're a bit short this week. Hope you don't mind." He puffs out his chest slightly. "I can manage just as well as the rest of them, so there's no need to worry."

"No, of course not," Harry says quickly. He leans forward and eagerly shakes Ron's offered hand. "I don't mind at all. Don't really think I need a bodyguard at all, to tell you the truth." Harry goes red faced and tries to backpedal. "I mean, it's fine, you know. It's what Tom—what my husband wants so of course I'm happy to be—"

Ron cuts him off with a friendly chuckle. "Oh, I know what you mean. Nobody likes a babysitter, of course. But you being the Minister's husband, you can't quite get out of it, can you?" he shrugs. "I'll try not to be a bother. I'll just keep an eye out and stay out of your way."

Harry sinks back into his seat and swallows past the sudden lump in his throat. "Oh, erm… right. That's good. That's…"

Bitsy shoots him an odd look. He doesn't know how she managed to get chocolate ice cream smeared on her forehead, but the sight eases some of the pressure in his chest.

"I'll just be right outside then," Ron says after a moment, making to exit, but Harry nearly bolts out of his seat.

"*Youwantsomeicecream*?" he blurts out. Bitsy gasps.

Ron pauses. "Sorry?"

Harry takes a deep breath and wills his blush to dissipate. “I just, er, wondered if you’d like an ice cream cone,” he says casually.

Ron glances between him and Bitsy for a moment, seeming slightly incredulous, and then shrugs.

“Why not? I’ll have to take it outside, mind you. Can’t laze about on the job. They’ll have me on desk duty for weeks, *again*.”

Harry grins, pleased. “No problem. I’ll bring it out to you, R— erm, I mean, auror Weasley, or—”

Ron waves him off with another laugh. “C’mon, just call me Ron why don’t you? We’re about the same age, aren’t we? Never quite crossed paths at Hogwarts, but I remember you, of course.”

Harry feels like he might cry. His heart feels nearly fit to burst. He smiles tremulously and nods. “Okay, Ron. I’ll bring it outside for you, yeah? Bitsy and I are about ready to go anyway.”

Ron beams at him and heads back outside, positioning himself beside the door and fixing his attention on the surrounding foot traffic.

Harry lets out a soft, relieved laugh, freezing when he turns to see Bitsy staring at him. She seems curious.

“Master Harry is being friends with the Auror Weasley?” she asks.

“Oh, erm,” Harry pauses. “No, I mean… we’ve… we’ve only just met, really.”

One of Bitsy’s ears twitch and she raises an eyebrow. “Master Harry is making a friend,” she insists. “The red-haired wizard is making him smile and laugh.”

Harry sighs.

That is what he was apparently sent out for, after all, to make a friend. He supposes he can’t blame Bitsy for jumping to conclusions. And it seems like he might have more of a chance this time. Ron hadn’t seemed angry, or disappointed to see him.

“Okay,” he finally says. “Yes, I’ve made a friend, Bitsy. My very own bodyguard. Aren’t you proud?”

“Yes, Bitsy is very proud and happy for Master Potter.” She nods fervently, not seeming to catch on to his sarcasm.

Harry rolls his eyes and walks up to the counter. He orders an ice cream cone for Ron and carries it outside, carefully holding his bag full of extravagant purchases on his other arm.

“Butterbeer!” Ron exclaims when he tastes it. “That’s brilliant, mate.”

Harry grins, his whole body feeling warm and content as they start down the street, Ron prowling slightly behind and to the side of them, his wand in one hand and his ice cream cone in the other. At his side, Harry feels the light touch of Bitsy's magic, tingling from the top of his head to his toes, and he relaxes even further.

She hadn't wanted to do it, but Harry had convinced her to alter his appearance while they were out in public. In the shops he allowed the disguise to drop, but while walking in the streets, he became too nervous at the thought of being photographed, or approached by a stranger, or accused of something by his parents. Bitsy doesn't change much—she only lightens the color of his skin a few shades, and changes the texture of his hair, and puts a very faint notice-me-not charm on his face to discourage people from taking in his facial features.

"Smart," Ron says, his eyes widening slightly when he glances back at Harry. "Makes my job easier."

Harry laughs. They walk on like that for a while, mostly window-shopping, and Harry soaks in the comforting, familiar feeling of shopping in Diagon Alley with his closest friend.

(Sort of.)

-

After a while the soft sound of a hooting owl stops Harry in his tracks, and he finds himself pausing and peering into the windows of the Eeylops Owl Emporium.

"Oh," he says softly, mostly to himself.

For the first time since he's come to this world, he lets himself think of Hedwig. His oldest friend, killed needlessly in his stead, in the middle of a war that apparently never happened here. His heart aches.

"Master Harry?" Bitsy asks him after a while. Harry can feel Ron hesitating ahead of them, glancing back.

"Don't I have an owl, Bitsy?" Harry asks abruptly, his eyes fixed on a large brown bird perched in the window of the shop. It stares at him with yellow eyes.

"Of course," Bitsy says. "Master Harry's owl is in the owlery at Riddle manor, of course. But he is—" she pauses suddenly and lowers her voice, glancing at Ron. "Master Harry is having his mail privileges revoked, after he is sending too many secret letters to Master Nott and cousin Draco." She blinks up at him reprovingly like this is something he ought to have been well aware of.

Harry gapes at her. This whole time, and his owl—of course, another thing taken away from him. How long has Hedwig—or perhaps it isn't Hedwig, but it is an owl at least, and how long has it been waiting for him in the owlery in the manor, forgotten? Harry hadn't even realized there *was* an owlery.

"Oh," he says again, deflating. "So I'm not allowed to see her?"

Bitsy seems conflicted. "Master Riddle is not forbidding Master Harry from the owlery," she finally says, fidgeting slightly. "Master Harry is only not being permitted to send letters."

"Right." Harry swallows down the sour taste in his mouth and sighs.

It's better than nothing, at least. Something to look forward to this evening when they return home. And he'll visit the owlery in private, so that Tom can't be angry with him. He'll behave perfectly. He won't even try to send a letter.

(Not that he has anyone to write to, anyway.)

"Thinking of buying an owl, Mr. Potter?" Ron asks, drifting back toward where Harry and Bitsy are standing.

"Harry, please," Harry says absently. "No, I, er… no. Of course not. But I—" his eyes dart across the street and he spots another familiar shop: The Magical Menagerie.

And there's something… Harry feels an odd itch in the back of his mind, a discontentment, and he finds himself heading towards whatever it is that is pulling him toward the animal shop.

"Wait a moment," he hears Ron's alarmed voice behind him, dodging around pedestrians and tugging Bitsy along beside him.

Harry slips inside the shop and feels some of the tension ease from his body. He glances around at the variety of cats and dogs, toads, kneazles, birds, and—

Snakes.

Harry drifts toward the shadowy back corner of the shop that has been dedicated to a wide variety of reptiles. An albino ball python rests in its own enclosure, curled into a ball and dozing lightly. Harry comes even closer, peering down at the snake and wondering what the feeling is that is tugging at his chest.

The snake senses his presence and unfurls slightly, lifting its head and sticking a forked tongue out to taste the air.

Another loud human come to poke and prod and shout, it hisses lazily.

I'm not going to do any of those things, Harry responds thoughtlessly. So eager for connection, he doesn't hear Bitsy's startled gasp behind him, or Ron suddenly going perfectly still.

The snake regards him with a bit more interest. *A speaker?*

Harry shrugs. *I'm sorry about the other humans.*

The snake unfurls even more out of its coil. *Humans are rude,* it says. *They touch my scales and scream if I move or blink.*

That's stupid, Harry responds. *Do you not like it here, then? Do you have enough to eat?*

The snake seems faintly confused. It doesn't respond for a while.

There are lots of mice, it finally says.

That's good, Harry says. He leans forward and rests his arm on the top of the tank. *Are you happy?*

I do not know what that means, the snake says.

Harry huffs out a frustrated breath and shakes his head.

Then there is a quiet cough behind him, a shuffling of feet, and Harry remembers where he is, and who he is with, and he turns around to see where Bitsy and Ron have gone.

They're standing just a few steps behind him, shocked. Ron's face has gone completely white. Bitsy is trembling, fiddling with one of her ears and seeming both disturbed and proud.

"Oh…" Harry says, glancing back at the snake. He feels a sudden sense of anxiety come over him.

What was he thinking? Speaking Parseltongue out in the open with no warning. He doesn't know how people in this world will react. He doesn't know if the old Harry could speak to snakes. He's feeling incredibly stupid, and opening his mouth to dismiss their fears when Ron's face spreads into an awed grin.

"Parseltongue, mate? That's *incredible.* I didn't know you could do that! Last I heard, there was only one speaker in all of Great Britain." He stares at Harry curiously. "What did you say to it, anyway?"

Only one other speaker? Harry thinks with a foreboding feeling.

"Nothing much," he shrugs, brushing aside his worries. At least Ron isn't terrified of him, or accusing him of being the heir of Slytherin. He figures that in a world where Tom Riddle is the Minister for Magic, perhaps there is less fear and misunderstanding surrounding the history of Parseltongue.

"Master Harry has been keeping a wonderful secret," Bitsy says, looking at him reproachfully. "Why is Master Harry always saying he is hating snakes?"

Harry is stumped. He wracks his brains for a valid explanation. “Erm… I’m sorry, Bitsy. It’s just that… everyone makes such a big deal of it, you know.” He shrugs. “I don’t really think about it that often. It’s just a part of me. So, er. Don’t tell Tom, please?”

Bitsy looks momentarily outraged, but schools her expression. A scheming look comes over her eye and Harry is instantly on guard.

“No, no. Don’t look at me like that. We were just… just chatting. It’s fine, Bitsy. I do *not* need a pet snake.”

She stares at him for a long moment, as if assessing the truthfulness of his statement, and then her shoulders slump in defeat. “We will see,” she mutters sulkily to herself.

“Blimey,” Harry hears Ron say. “Never heard of a Parselmouth who doesn’t like snakes…”

Harry cringes, but he doesn’t correct him. He doesn’t know how to explain his complicated relationship with snakes. He thinks of that moment at the zoo, when he made the glass disappear and helped that great big snake escape. The Dursleys thought he was trying to attack Dudley, of course, but that hadn’t been the goal.

Harry had been punished for it all the same.

***

Harry is digging deep in the back of his closet that evening, stowing all of his ridiculous purchases, when he finds it.

A small black chest, no bigger than a shoebox, shoved in the corner of the closet, buried beneath about a pound of socks.

Harry picks it up and stares at it curiously. There are small designs etched into the enchanted wood. When he looks closer, Harry sees that they are little dragons, flapping their wings and curling their tails and exhaling smoke that feels hot under Harry’s fingers. He drops the chest for a moment, startled.

There is a padlock on the front, something small and gold and shiny, embossed with an ‘H,’ and Harry rubs the pad of his thumb over it. He’s considering setting the box back down to look for a key, certain that it must be in the closet somewhere too, when the padlock quivers and then falls open.

Harry feels a bit uneasy. The box doesn't belong to him, after all. It must have belonged to the other Harry.

(Just like this closet belonged to the other Harry. The room, too, and the bathroom, and the large claw-foot tub. The dozens of silky robes, soft fuzzy socks, and expensive dress-robes, sparkly shirts clearly designed to be worn in muggle night clubs, and— everything. Everything in this world that belongs to Harry now, doesn't really. He has to remember that.)

But the other Harry isn't here now. So Harry figures it's alright if he opens the chest just a little bit. If he just takes a quick peek inside, just to catch a glimpse of what sorts of things the other Harry might need to secure behind a padlock that was clearly magically coded to only open to Harry's own touch.

(The other Harry hadn't known that this Harry would be here. He hadn't thought to protect his belongings against other versions of himself. Who would have?)

So Harry opens it. He very carefully lifts the lid until it catches on hinges and then he lets it rest there while he trails his eyes over the contents.

There is jewelry, lots of it, shiny rubies and pearls and diamonds and every kind of gemstone that Harry can't name. He runs his fingers curiously over them, watching them glint and shimmer in the dim lighting of the closet.

He's staring intently down at an ornate necklace shaped like a snake when—it moves, curled up in his palm, its scales fluttering, and a forked tongue coming out to taste the air.

Hello hatchling, it says.

Oh, Harry answers, clutching his racing heart with his other hand. *Hello. I'm sorry, I didn't realise…*

The snake rears its little head up and stares at him. *You have not spoken with me before,* it hisses, sounding mildly offended. *Why did you not tell me you were a speaker?*

Ah, it's erm… Harry hesitates. *It's new?*

The snake is silent for a moment. *It has been many moons since your last visit,* it says.

I'm sorry, Harry responds sheepishly. *I've been… busy.*

The snake falls silent again. It stretches out, coiling around his wrist again and again, and then rests its head over the soft, sensitive skin of Harry's inner wrist.

Harry stares down at it for a while, studying the intensely detailed scales and the way it seems to shimmer with life, warm, pulsing, like the little jeweled snake is actually alive. But, after a while, his attention is drawn back to the chest. He moves a bit more carefully now, wary of the snake wrapped around his wrist, but he continues digging through the contents.

There are photographs folded up into little squares, and Harry unfolds each one carefully. He studies a picture of other-Harry and Draco, Draco's arm slung carelessly over Harry's

shoulders and their heads together, eyes twinkling with mischievous laughter. There is another photo of Harry and Theo, half-dressed, and Harry is clutching a bottle of firewhisky, his cheeks red and his eyes dilated. In the photo Theo grabs him by the face and kisses him hard, and other-Harry shivers and then shoves Theo away, rolling his eyes and taking a long pull from the bottle of alcohol.

Harry's stomach flips. He shoves that photo to the bottom of the stack.

The next photo shows Harry and Tom at what looks like a wedding ceremony. They're both in formal robes, Tom's simple and dark green, and Harry's far more elaborate, shining silver and embroidered with glittering beads and jewels that catch in the light. Harry studies the photo closely. Harry and Tom are standing side by side, but not touching, and both look intensely uncomfortable, even as they lean in to share a small, chaste kiss.

The little snake is there too, coiled around other-Harry's neck, and other-Harry seems uneasy, reaching up every so often and tugging at the scales.

You were a wedding gift, Harry hisses absently, and the silver snake, still wrapped around his wrist, lifts its head.

Yes. The other speaker created me, it hisses. *I am yours.*

Are you alive?

In a sense.

Harry wrinkles his nose. *What does that mean?*

The speaker formed me from rare jewels and metals. He spelled life and magic into my cold scales. When you touch me, I can breathe and think and move. When you put me away, I sleep and await your return.

That doesn't sound like a very nice life, Harry says. *And if you're so rare, and you're mine, why have I kept you inside this chest?*

You do not like me, the snake responds. *You have smelt of fear and loathing each time you have touched me. Except for now,* the snake adds, sounding a bit pleased.

Harry hums. He folds the photo of him and Tom back into a tiny square and sets it back down.

And underneath all of the photographs and jewels and other odds-and-ends, Harry finds an old, worn, moleskin journal and then right beside that, a small pouch with some sort of powdery substance in it. He squints at it.

What is this? he hisses.

I do not know. It smells of my ancestors, the snake responds, forked tongue flicking out to taste the air.

Harry, in a very thoughtless move, tips the small pouch over, dumping the powder into his hand. A cloud of white dust puffs up into the air, getting into his face, making him sneeze and his eyes water. “Fuck,” he croaks, scrubbing at his face with his other hand. He lifts the powder up and sniffs delicately at it. It doesn’t smell like anything. But Harry supposes it must be something more than dust, or sugar, because his palm is tingling slightly, and the fractional amount that he’d just inhaled through the air is making him feel a bit fuzzy.

Harry wonders what kind of drug it is. He stares down at it in his palm, trying to decide what to do. He supposes he will have to simply wash it down the drain in the bathroom and then scrub at his hands to make sure none of the residue remains.

But then—he still wouldn’t know what kind of drug it was. And Harry is morbidly curious. Why would other-Harry have hidden away such a small amount in this chest? Was he saving it for a special occasion? Or just in case of emergencies? Did anyone else know about it?

Harry runs his tongue across his teeth and thinks. He could just try a little bit of it, safe here in the closet, just to see how it feels. And then he would get rid of it. Nobody would have to know.

“Harry?”

Harry jerks his head up, eyes wide.

Tom is there, frozen, one hand wrapped around the doorframe, and his eyes are fixed on Harry’s palm.

Harry’s heart seizes.

“Is that what I think it is?” Tom asks quietly. He steps fully into the closet, and Harry panics. He shoves the chest closed and throws himself backward, scrambling over loose sweaters and shoes and trinkets and pressing himself into the corner of the closet. The white powdery drug goes everywhere, spilling out of his palm onto his clothing and the floor and puffing out into the air.

Harry can’t breathe. His chest feels tight, and his entire body numb. Tom steps closer, shoes rustling over fabric, and he takes out his wand. There is a quiet murmur and then a vibrating hum in the air all around them, and the powdery substance vanishes.

Harry’s palm tingles.

“How much did you take?” Tom asks, his tone soft and dangerous.

“None,” Harry says, finally finding his tongue. “I didn’t. No. I wasn’t going to, I was just…” he casts his eyes around the closet for an explanation. He looks back to Tom finally, who is staring at him with a look of betrayal on his face.

“Please, Harry. Do not lie to me,” Tom says. “All I ask is that you do not lie to me. Not again.” His hands curl into fists at his sides.

“I’m not lying. I’m not,” Harry pleads. He feels his entire body beginning to tremble. His breath comes out in short gasps. He draws his knees close to his chest and blinks rapidly.

Tom comes even closer and Harry flinches hard, ducking his head, turning his face away. And that seems to make Tom falter. He makes a confused sound, like he had been expecting Harry to react in a certain way and now isn’t quite sure how to proceed.

“Okay,” he finally says. He sits down on the floor of the closet a few feet from Harry and the next time he speaks, his voice is perfectly neutral. “What were you doing with it, then?”

Harry shudders. “Nothing,” he says. “I was just— I was just looking for my sweater, and I, ah — I was looking at some old pictures and—”

Tom’s gaze darts toward the sealed black chest, tipped sideways and abandoned on the other side of the closet, and his brow furrows. Then he turns his gaze back to Harry. “You’re shaking,” he murmurs. “I want the truth, Harry. Are you absolutely certain you didn’t—”

“Yes,” Harry says desperately, his voice cracking. “I’m sorry, I only held it in my palm for a moment. I forgot I even had it. I was just— I was just looking at it, I wasn’t going to—”

Tom moves a bit closer, jostling the clothing surrounding them, and Harry hears the light, metallic *clink* of a belt buckle.

He’s not entirely sure what happens after that.

-

Uncle Vernon only used the belt on Harry a few times— only when Harry was really bad. Only when he deserved it.

“On your knees, boy,” he would bark when Harry dropped one of Aunt Petunia’s fancy china plates, little bits of broken ceramic scattering everywhere. Harry would drop to the floor instantly, shrugging off his shirt and hunching his shoulders.

“Get my belt,” Uncle Vernon would growl, when they would come home from a weekend trip and find little Harry magicked out of his padlocked cupboard, hiding in the pantry, surrounded by empty containers of food, chocolate smeared over his fingers.

And after a while, Uncle Vernon hadn’t had to say anything. Harry had known, just from the look on his uncle’s face, just how much trouble he was in for one thing or another. He had learned to get on his knees early, to bring the belt of his own accord, to sit quietly and take his punishment so that it would be over faster, so that he could drag himself up to his room and and lay on his stomach, ignoring the stinging pains in his shoulders and back until they faded to dull throbs.

-

“‘—out of a deep sleep, more like a swoon than a sleep.’”

There’s the sound of a throat clearing, and a quiet sniff, and a shuffling of paper, like the pages of a book.

“‘He would certainly have waked up of his own accord not much later, for he felt himself sufficiently rested and well slept, but it seemed to him as if a fleeting step and a cautious shutting of the door leading into the hall had aroused him.’”

Something squeezes Harry’s side gently, dragging over the skin of his hip, creating goosebumps in its wake. Then Harry hears the sound again, of ruffling pages and a quiet intake of breath.

“‘The electric lights in the street cast a pale sheen here and there on the ceiling and the upper surfaces of the furniture, but down below, where he lay, it was dark. Slowly, awkwardly trying out his feelers, which he now first learned to appreciate, he pushed his way to the door to see what had been happening there.’”

Harry shivers.

He blinks, and his vision swims into hazy focus. He’s seated on something soft—Tom’s lap, maybe? and—there is a heavy blanket draped around his shoulders, and something heavy and warm, coiled around his neck. His entire body is aching, trembling, like he has been holding himself rigidly still for a ridiculous amount of time and is only now feeling the results.

“Tom?” he croaks.

Tom’s shoulders slump. Harry peers at him. His husband’s face is white, threaded with worry and guilt, and he is so close to Harry that he can see little flecks of gold in his eyes.

“Wh—” Harry tries to speak, but the words come out gravelly. He coughs hard and then tries again. “What happened?”

“I am not certain,” Tom says, carefully closing the book in his hand, setting it down on the bed beside them, and studying Harry like one might study a troubling hospital patient. His arms are wrapped very firmly around him. “You… dissociated.”

“Dissociated?” Harry frowns. He’d heard that word before, from one of Hermione’s muggle studies textbooks. It hadn’t sounded like anything good.

The silvery snake that is wrapped around his neck hisses something unintelligible, sounding angry, and Harry jumps. He reaches a shaky hand up and feels the cool scales resting on his collarbone.

“Sorry,” Harry mumbles, for lack of what else to say. His throat is dry, and he tries to clear it. Tom presses a glass of water into his hand and Harry drinks gratefully.

Tom’s face twists. “Do not apologize,” he says. “I am…” he hesitates. “I did not handle that well. I should not have— cornered you.”

Harry flinches. His eyes dart toward the closet, where he hopes the little black chest is still resting, safely locked, where he can continue inspecting it later away from Tom’s prying eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Harry says again. He fidgets and avoids Tom’s eye, staring down at the blanket on his lap. He sets the empty glass of water down, and Tom vanishes it. “I didn’t…”

“You thought I was going to hurt you,” Tom says.

“No,” Harry says, cringing, his mind flashing back to the sound of the belt buckle. “No, of course not. I— I was just—”

“Breathe,” Tom says. “Slowly. In and out.”

Harry’s breath stutters. He reaches up, wrapping his fingers around the smooth scales of the silver snake.

He needs space, Tom hisses then, his attention directed to the snake, his eyes dark and forbidding. *You know he does not tolerate you.*

If he needs space, it is only from you, the snake retorts, coiling a bit tighter around Harry’s neck. *You have made our nest stink of terror.*

“I’m—” Tom’s voice hitches. He looks back to Harry. “I am sorry. I must admit I do not understand.”

“No, it’s nothing, I just… you startled me,” Harry tries. “It’s fine, it’s not—”

“That is not normal, Harry. You have never… I have never seen that look on your face before.” Tom looks vaguely nauseous. “You were unresponsive for nearly an hour. I did not know what I would do if you didn’t resurface on your own. I had even begun to consider the possibility of using Legilimency to pull you back—”

Harry’s eyes widen in horror and he jolts, scrambling off Tom’s lap and further back on the bed, pressing up against the headboard. The blanket tumbles off from around his shoulders. “No—don’t— you can’t—” his vision goes spotty again, his heart hammering in his chest, and Tom utters a low oath.

“I didn’t mean—”

“You can’t,” Harry says harshly, gasping for breath. “You can’t do that. It’s my— it’s *my* mind. You can’t do it. You can’t make me. If you do, then I’ll— I’ll—” he squeezes his eyes tightly shut.

The edge of the bed dips, Tom trying to come closer, but before he can touch Harry the little snake rears, hissing dangerously.

Leave us, it says.

He needs me.

That may be, but he does not want you, the snake threatens, slithering down from Harry’s neck and onto the bed sheets between Harry and Tom. *Do not touch him. You know the power of my bite, master.*

Azim, you are being ridiculous. I am no threat to my mate.

The stench of terror grows, the closer you approach, the snake hisses. *You are a fool who does not know his own mate. You have made my hatchling retreat into the confines of his own mind, and still do not understand. You are not welcome in this nest.*

Harry, mind buzzing with fear, hardly comprehends the hissed conversation. He only desperately hopes that the snake will not inform Tom of his Parseltongue abilities.

Tom blinks, seeming a bit startled, and then looks at Harry again. He studies Harry’s knees curled to his chest, hands trembling and pupils blown out and glassy. His face contorts and he suddenly seems regretful. He shifts off the bed and moves backward.

He will not harm you, the snake says, returning to Harry, slithering up his hand to coil around his wrist. Harry doesn’t respond. He takes in a slow breath in and out.

“I of course would never wish to use Legilimency on you without your consent, Harry,” Tom says quietly. “It was only something I considered as a last resort. My only thought was for your safety and wellbeing.”

“I don’t want you in my head,” Harry says, his words biting. *“Ever.* No matter the reason. Even if you think you must.”

“Okay,” Tom says. “Alright, Harry. I won’t mention it again. I apologize.”

Harry nods jerkily, his back still pressed to the headboard of the bed and his knees tucked up to his chest.

They lapse into an uneasy silence. Harry tries to pretend like Tom isn’t staring at him. He rubs his thumb idly along the snake’s scales, trying to calm his still racing heart.

“I thought perhaps you had sold him,” Tom finally murmurs quietly from across the room.

Harry blinks, looking up. “What?”

“Azim,” Tom says. “I have not seen him since our wedding night. You said he made you uncomfortable.”

Harry looks down at the snake. “Oh. Right,” he says.

Tom’s jaw clenches, and he seems pained. “I don’t understand,” he says again. He opens his mouth and then hesitates. “Harry, do you… do you remember what you said to me last night?”

Harry stares at Tom. “Last night?” he repeats. His eyes dart downward when he sees Tom’s hands flexing at his sides.

“Yes,” Tom says. “Last night in the library.”

Harry flushes. “Yes,” he says.

“You were half-asleep,” Tom presses. “And I wasn’t certain whether you were dreaming or lucid.”

“You’re going to make me say it again, are you?” Harry says, fidgeting on the bed, tugging at the corner of his blanket. “Yes, I made an absolute fool of myself.” He swallows thickly. “I’m not—of course I’m not lonely, I’m fine, because I have— I have you, and Bitsy, and—you don’t need to send me off on shopping sprees, or, whatever it is that you think will make me happy, or fix me—”

“Harry,” Tom interrupts gently, and Harry instantly shuts his mouth. His face blooms red. He hadn’t meant to say all of that.

“You mean to say that you remember nothing beyond that?” Tom says, his gaze intent.

Harry’s brow furrows. He tries to think through everything that had happened the night before in the library, but most of the evening is a haze. He had been utterly exhausted after their day at the ministry, despairing about his unpleasant interaction with Hermione, and had wanted nothing more than to close his eyes and sleep for a very, very long time and perhaps never wake up.

“I… fell asleep,” he says slowly. “Didn’t I?”

Tom’s eyes on him are dark, unreadable, and he is silent for a while before nodding. “Yes,” he says. He opens his mouth and falters for a long moment, seeming to be thinking very hard about something, but in the end, the tension leaves his eyes and he sighs. “Did you enjoy your outing?” he asks. “Bitsy tells me you forced her to accompany you.”

Harry’s eyes dart up and he frowns. “Oh, I didn’t—I thought it would be alright, but I’m sorry if—” he cuts off when he sees Tom’s soft, bemused smile.

“I am only teasing you,” he says gently, and Harry’s heart stutters. His face flames again.

“Oh. It was—yes, it was nice,” Harry stammers. “Thank you.”

Tom's face contorts, all humor leaving his eyes, and he seems pained again. "Do not thank me," he says. "I am not your warden. This manor should not feel like your prison. I simply wanted to make it clear that you may come and go as you please. You do not have to spend all of your days tucked away in your chambers, or in the library, or in the kitchen with Bitsy."

Harry stares at Tom and then his lips press together. "If I'm not a prisoner, then why did you tell my parents I'd be confined to the manor?" he says slowly. "Why did you lock the door to the library? Why did you—"

Tom grimaces and he shifts forward, approaching the bed and Azim lets out a threatening hiss but says nothing as Tom reaches out, pulling Harry forward and into his arms.

Harry freezes. His pulse rabbits, eyes widening, and he holds himself very stiffly in Tom's arms until Tom sighs, muttering something incomprehensible and winds his fingers through Harry's curls, palm cupping the nape of his neck. Harry shivers and then goes limp, relaxing into the embrace and letting his cheek rest against the front of Tom's robes.

"I shouldn't have done it," Tom murmurs, his breath ghosting hot over the top of Harry's head. "Any of it. Forgive me, Harry."

Harry breathes in slowly, and then breathes out, and he allows his arms to relax, curling around Tom's waist and fisting his robes.

"You scared me," he says, very quietly.

"I know," Tom says.

"You treated me like a child," Harry says. He presses his cheek more firmly to Tom's chest. "You wouldn't listen. You ignored me. You only— shouted, and, and— you were so angry."

Tom's breath hitches. He tightens his arms around Harry. "I know," he says again. "I know, darling. You didn't deserve that."

Harry swallows hard and blinks away sudden tears.

He wonders if maybe this is the right moment for him to come clean. To tell Tom everything, about Nott and Draco and about his parents, and about who he really is and where he came from. He wonders if Tom would believe him. If he would really listen, like he promised.

Harry hesitates there for a long, long time, tucked into Tom's arms, listening to the slightly-agitated beat of his husband's heart, and he opens his mouth. He tries to get himself to say something.

"I'm not him," he finally forces out, his words hoarse. "I'm not… that Harry, that wasn't me. Not… anymore. Can't you see that?"

It's not what he meant to say, not really even close, and Harry squeezes his eyes tightly shut. He feels immensely disappointed in himself. But he supposes it's at least a step in the right direction.

“Yes, of course,” Tom responds, sounding heavy with regret. “I can see it, Harry. You have been trying so very hard to make this marriage work and I have not been able to look past my anger and resentment to see it. And how could I not have seen it? I have been a fool. And I have hurt you. I have hurt my husband.”

Harry shudders. He lifts his head, opens his mouth to say something, but his gaze is caught in the deep well of Tom’s eyes, and his mind goes blank. He feels heat rise in his cheeks, and his heartbeat stuttering, and Tom looks between Harry’s eyes, and then down to his lips, and then up again. His visage darkens and his palm curls around the nape of Harry’s neck, tugging him forward.

And when their lips meet, it is like an electric jolt straight to Harry’s heart.

It sets a tingling fire ablaze in his mouth, under his skin and behind his ribcage, and he gasps in shock, rearing back slightly and Tom chases him, pressing their mouths back together and groaning.

“Mmmf—” Harry tries to speak, to say something, although he has no idea what, but his words are swallowed up around soft, firm lips pressing to kiss, and clashing teeth, and Tom’s hand firmly cradling his head and the other wrapped around his waist, keeping him still.

Harry feels overheated, and his prick hardens instantly beneath his pants and he barely resists the urge to rub himself all over the front of Tom’s robes. Tom groans, his kisses growing feverish, and he only releases Harry’s lips so he can attach his lips to the sensitive spot beneath his jaw, sucking hard until Harry makes a high, desperate whining sound he hadn’t even known he could make.

“Forgive me,” Tom pants between kisses. “Please, forgive me. My sweet, perfect husband. Let me treat you the way you deserve.”

“Tom,” Harry says through a heavy exhale of breath, shivering, clinging to the man’s robes like they are all that is holding him down to earth. “Tom, please—”

He doesn’t know if he wants to ask him to stop, or to *never stop,* and his thoughts are in a wild disarray, his skin feels hot, and he never knew that it could feel so good to be held and touched and kissed like this. His arms move, winding around Tom’s neck, clutching him for dear life and shivering when Tom’s lips travel down the column of his throat and drag along his collarbone, and Tom presses his hand firmly to Harry’s lower back, encouraging him to press closer, to continue squirming, his hips jerking and his stomach tightening with thick, unbridled want.

But then Harry, nearly lost to the haze of arousal and pleasure, somehow finds the strength within himself to press the palm of one hand flat against Tom’s chest.

Tom falters, goes still, except for the soft lave of his tongue over the dip in Harry’s collarbone.

Harry moans, conflicted, and shakes his head. “Stop,” he says. “Please…” his voice is shaky, and the problem is he doesn’t want to stop, not really, except for that this feels dangerously

like approaching the precipice of which neither of them would be able to return.

And what would be waiting at the bottom?

Harry's chest is heaving, his heart thudding erratically, and Tom's pupils are blown wide when he lifts his head. His arms are still curled possessively around Harry. He licks his lips and his jaw clenches, and he looks for just a moment like he is considering diving straight back into the inferno of heat and pleasure notwithstanding Harry's complaints, but he takes in a shuddering breath and then finally loosens his grip.

Harry unwinds himself from Tom's arms, and scoots back until he is deposited safely on the mattress again, with a few very proper inches of space between them. He still hasn't quite got control of his breath, and he's sure his cheeks are ruddy and pink, eyes glassy and lips red and swollen.

The snake decides to speak then, and Harry jerks in alarm, lifting his hand and staring at the snake still coiled around his wrist.

Next time you intend to mate, please stow me safely in my chest before you begin, Azim says dryly, sounding amused, and Harry flushes. He looks back at Tom, who doesn't seem to have heard a word the snake said and is instead staring at Harry with a dark, hungry, wild look in his eye. His hands are curled into tight fists, pressed to his knees, like it is taking everything in him to hold still and not cross those few inches of space to take Harry back into his arms.

"I…" Harry hesitates, his eyes dropping to Tom's mouth. He lifts his gaze, swallowing nervously, and Tom's eyes dart straight to Harry's throat, tracking the movement.

"Do not look at me like that," Tom pleads, hoarse, a vein in his forehead pulsing.

"Like what?" Harry asks, breathless and shivery.

"Like you want me," Tom says. "Like you'd let me do anything. Like you'd die just for the feel of my hands on you."

Harry's eyes widen and he blinks, more heat coiling in his stomach, and he licks his lips. Tom groans.

"I'm sorry," Harry says. "I do want you, I just…" he trails off, feeling slightly disturbed by his own admittance.

Tom shakes his head. The movement seems to clear his thoughts a bit, and he relaxes, some of the dark tension easing out of his shoulders. "I am the one who must apologize," he murmurs. He reaches across the bed and takes Harry's hand, winding their fingers together. "I lost control. You are simply," he pauses, "irresistible."

Harry stares at their entwined hands and then looks up at Tom incredulously. "Irresistible?" he repeats.

Tom squeezes his hand briefly and lets go. "You do not know what you do to me," he says.

Harry swallows again and ducks his head when Tom's gaze grows heated. "Are you angry?" he asks.

Tom's face grows slack and he seems bewildered. "Angry?"

"That's… twice now," Harry says, and then adds hastily, "in the past few months. That I've… said no."

"You may turn me away as much and as often as you'd like," Tom says gently, his eyes going soft. "I will take exactly what you are willing to give me. Do you understand?"

Harry shivers again and then nods slowly. "Okay," he says, although he's not sure he believes it.

Tom sighs, and scrubs a hand over his face, suddenly seeming weary. "I interrupted our conversation," he says, sounding disappointed with himself. "You… beguiled me. Mere minutes following a dissociative episode, and I nearly ravished you here on this bed."

"Oh," Harry says, growing flustered. "Er… sorry?"

Tom laughs in a self-deprecating way. He shakes his head. "Please, Harry. It is no one's fault but my own."

Harry shifts on the bed, a bit uneasy, and doesn't respond, although he nods in understanding. He rubs his thumb over Azim's scales.

Riddle straightens up and reaches for the book he had been reading, placing it on Harry's bedside table. He smooths the blankets around Harry and then runs a tired hand through his own hair, tucking it into place and adjusting his robes.

Harry watches him curiously. He watches the man transform from Tom, Harry's husband, to Minister Riddle, all in the span of a few seconds.

And just like that, Tom has control of himself and he stands, regarding Harry with a searching gaze, eyes traveling over his face, to his neck and chest, lingering over his hips and thighs before traveling back up. "You missed dinner," he says quietly. "That is why…" he pauses. "That is why I came looking for you. Will you eat something? I can have Bitsy send up an evening snack. And… perhaps we can talk some more."

Harry hesitates, and then nods. He wraps his arms around himself. "Okay," he says. "Yes, I'm, er. I'm not very hungry? But I'll try to eat something."

"That is all I ask," Tom says. His eyes darken again, just a bit, and he leans forward to tuck a stray curl behind Harry's ear. Harry leans into the touch and closes his eyes. And his heartbeat, which had been racing so furiously only minutes earlier, finally slows to a calm, normal pace. And Harry, for perhaps the first time since he arrived in this world, feels that the safest place he could be at the moment is right where he is, perched on this bed in the mussed sheets and with his husband's palm cradling his cheek.

Chapter End Notes

TWs: dissociation, explicit references to past child abuse including belting/corporal punishment, very brief thought of suicidal ideation, brief encounter with illicit wizarding drugs, and some (consensual) sexually explicit content between Harry/Tom.

summary: Harry finds an unidentified drug in his closet left by other-Harry and briefly considers trying it before Tom finds him. Tom is initially furious and accuses Harry of being high, and Harry grows panicked enough to lapse into a dissociative state. We see some insight into his childhood with the Dursleys and learn that Uncle Vernon used the belt on Harry occasionally when he misbehaved. During the conversation that follows, Tom kisses Harry and it grows quite heated before Harry puts a stop to it.

additional note: All excerpts that Tom reads to Harry are taken directly from chapter 2 of *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka.

I had no idea that snakes can't blink! lmao so I did a little bit of editing to remove all instances of snakes blinking in this chapter <3

Chapter 13: 13

Chapter Summary

Harry does a bit of light reading and sends a letter.

Chapter Notes

*** Please note updated tags for the fic, as well as TWs for this chapter in the end note. There are a few new warnings to be aware of. Tread carefully!

Okay so I know I said I had 90% of this story written. Buuut sometimes (and by that I mean *all the time*) I get inspired and have to insert a brand new chapter that slightly changes the entire course of the fic. <3 And this chapter was one of those hahaha. If you want to blame someone, blame other-Harry, who has taken my entire heart and ran with it.

So if you notice the chapter count occasionally increasing, that's why lol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It isn't until very late a few evenings later that Harry thinks of the black chest again. He sits up in bed from a half-doze and scrubs one hand over his face, glancing out the window at the darkened sky and pale, crescent moon.

You are awake, Azim says, and Harry looks down at his wrist.

Yes, he answers. He shoves his blankets off and stretches, pulling on his dressing gown and tying it loosely around his waist.

The manor is quiet.

Harry knows that somewhere, probably, Bitsy is dusting old paintings or kneading bread dough or repairing holes in the curtains, although she always keeps one ear turned toward his chambers.

But Harry is not waking from a nightmare, and he is not crying, soaked in sweat and trembling, and so he thinks that Bitsy will not come to check on him, even if she senses him moving around. Not unless he calls out for her. So he shuffles quietly into the closet, closing the door firmly behind him this time. He steps over to where the small black chest still lays,

tipped on its side, and he goes to his knees beside it, turning it right-side-up and pressing his thumb over the padlock.

Are you putting me away? Azim asks when the chest opens.

Do you want me to? Harry answers absently. He carefully pushes the jewelry to the side, rooting around for what had caught his attention before— the moleskin journal.

Perhaps later, Azim hisses after a few moments. *It is nice to rest. But I do not always like to sleep for so long. I begin to forget myself.*

Stay with me a while longer, then, Harry hisses. *And when you're tired, you can rest. I won't forget you again.*

The snake doesn't respond, although it seems faintly pleased, and it wraps itself a little more tightly around Harry's wrist.

Harry finds the journal still there, tucked beneath the stack of photos and he lifts it up, letting it fall open to a random page in his palm. Other-Harry's words jump right out at him.

> *"—thinks he can control me,"*

is written in messy, looping cursive.

> *"They all do. Mother promised that marriage would mean more freedom but she lied, <u>like always</u>. And father still thinks of me as a vapid, petulant child. If he had his way I'd probably spend the rest of my miserable life sitting quietly at his heels. I'm so bloody tired of everything. ~~Sometimes I wish I could just~~"*

The next few lines are scribbled harshly out, so much so that the parchment is torn in places. Harry can't make out what it says. His stomach turns and he flips a few pages ahead.

> *"—didn't even want to marry me, that much was obvious, so dunno why he cares so much what I do ~~or who I fuck~~ . It's my life and this is my home now whether he likes it or not. And I'm not hurting anyone ~~but myself~~ . He doesn't know how much I can take. How much pain and punishment I can endure just for a small taste of freedom. He doesn't understand why I do what I do, but Theo does. He knows I'm not some fragile, delicate thing. He knows what I need, and—"*

Harry's eyes jump further ahead, and his heart sinks.

> *"—course I know Theo's using me. I don't care because it's better that way. He gets what he wants and I get to forget, at least for a little while. It doesn't matter that he's too rough, ~~that it hurts too much sometimes ,~~ because what other choice do I have?*
>
> *I've seen the way Tom looks at me. He could <u>never</u> understand. He wants a gentle thing, someone sweet and soft and innocent, the perfect trophy wife without any scars or baggage. I can never be what he needs, nor can he for me.*

Mother says I have to keep trying, to stop being ungrateful and to just behave and then I won't have to be punished so much, but why should I? It feels as though no matter what I do I always mess up somehow, and they call me home, ~~and father takes great pleasure in making me~~ "

The lines are scribbled out again, the page torn up, big tear stains splotched all over the place, and Harry feels sick. He flips forward another few pages.

"—need more already because Tom vanished most of my supply again. But Theo says if I won't put out, he's not going to be my errand boy. And Draco's no help. Sometimes I think he likes that I'm such a fucking mess. ~~I think it makes him feel better about himself.~~

I don't know what to do. Tom is breathing down my neck and I can't get a moment alone and Theo says he's going to find someone else to fuck if I don't get my shit together.

I don't think I can do this. I can't stay here, in this great bloody manor with Tom's judgemental sneer following me everywhere I go. I can't strike out on my own without the money from my inheritance, and father took the rest of that away after those photos leaked of me and Theo at that stupid muggle club.

(I didn't even want to go out that night. And the sex was bad. ~~I honestly don't remember the last time sex was good .~~)

And I can't go home. I won't live in that place again. The longer I'm out from beneath father's boots, the more I realize how <u>absolutely completely fucked</u> all of it was. I was a child. A fucking <u>child</u> and he hurt me. And mother stood by and watched, she didn't care, she let him, ~~and she smiled while he~~ "

There are more lines scribbled out here and there, great splatters of dark ink, and then entire pages of the journal are torn out and missing.

What are you doing? Azim asks.

Reading, Harry answers after a bit of delay.

Why must you read what you have already written?

So I can remember.

Harry runs a shaky finger along the jagged edges of parchment. He continues reading where it picks off on the next page, the looping cursive a little calmer, easier to read, like other-Harry had taken a few day's break in between entries.

"I really want to see Siri, but—"

Harry's eyes widen and he grips the journal more firmly.

Siri— like *Sirius?* His heart thuds at the sudden mention of what might be his godfather in this world. He reads the next few lines closely, not wanting to miss a single detail.

"—guess he's off on another adventure, somewhere in Albania this time I think, or Egypt, cavorting with giants or goblins or whatever the fuck it is he's doing when he's avoiding the family.

I understand why he does it ~~but I really wish he'd take me with him~~ ."

At that line, Harry's breath catches. He thinks of third year, when for a brief, wonderful moment he had believed he could live with Sirius and they both were going to be safe and happy together. It seems even in this universe, Sirius's presence is not a given.

(At least he's *alive* here, Harry thinks with a bittersweet, hopeful feeling making his chest go tight.)

"Sometimes I think maybe I should tell him everything. Ask him for help, maybe. But I'm afraid of what his answer would be. I'm afraid he would see how I've changed, that he would see how ~~ugly and rotten~~ I am on the inside. Plus, the last time we spent any significant amount of time together I was still a kid ~~and I hadn't made so many mistakes~~.

It's not fair. I know they all think I'm a slut and a whore and a spoiled brat, ~~and maybe I am~~ but how else did they expect me to turn out?

I don't know what to do. I really don't want to owl Theo. He's been asking to see me but I'm getting tired of him. I was almost relieved when Tom put up the wards to block him and Draco from the manor. He used to be a nice distraction but now it seems he only serves to make my life harder. Last time we fucked he hurt me almost as much as father would in one of his rages. ~~I think he likes it when I cry.~~ And lately when I tell him to stop, that it's too far, he pretends he can't hear me."

Harry's vision blurs, his hands trembling, and he can hardly swallow around the lump in his throat. He swipes frustratedly at his cheeks and scrubs at his eyes and then forces himself to continue reading, skipping another few pages ahead because he doesn't think he can stomach reading anything more about Theo at the moment.

The next entry is from about a month later.

"Tom caught me with someone again. ~~I didn't even do it on purpose this time.~~ I thought he'd be at work until late and I was having one of those days so I found a bloke at the pub and told him I'd let him do whatever he wanted to me. Theo's out of town and I'm still mad at him, anyway.

Everything was going fine until the stupid prick choked me too hard and I passed out.

Tom was all over me when I came to. He looked like he'd witnessed a bloody murder. I tried to tell him it's no big deal and it happens all the time but that only made him angrier. I told him if he was so jealous then he could fuck me too, I don't mind, and then he just, well. His face went all blank."

Harry is painfully familiar with that look. He pauses, swallowing thickly and imagines how angry Tom must have been. He runs the tip of his finger over the harsh line indentations, like other-Harry had been pressing the quill into the page as hard as he could without tearing.

"Anyway, he kicked the bloke out and told him we'd press charges if he came near me again. I told Tom that wasn't up to him and that if I wanted to go out and meet guys ~~and get fucked so hard I pass out~~ then that's my choice. Tom said I promised him I wouldn't do it in the manor anymore, which I suppose is true but it was in my own bed in my private chambers, so why should he care? Better that than on my knees in a dirty alley or the bathroom of a pub. Is that what he wants?

I told him as much and he said if I want to act like a child, I could forget about our marriage and just go and live with my parents. He said I'm clearly miserable and he's tired of being the bad guy. And I sort of lost it. I told him if he tried to break our marriage contact I'd kill myself. And then Tom said to stop being dramatic and that I'm more likely to die in some freak orgy accident at this point than to kill myself."

Harry flinches hard. He feels nauseous. He wonders if the other-Harry sat on the roof like he had. He wonders if other-Harry ever thought about how the rain would feel as he fell.

"And so I said well who cares how it happens? And wouldn't that be the best case scenario for both of us anyway? And then Tom was so angry he couldn't speak to me anymore. He sent Bitsy to deal with me and then he went and sulked in his study.

Now mother and father want to see me and it's because that stupid bloke went to the press and said Tom tried to kill him. But somehow it's all my fault, even though it would have been fine if Tom had just ignored me like he usually does instead of meddling.

I think I'm just going to meet up with Theo tonight because he says I can have more dragon's claw or maybe even some brain elixir as long as I'm good and do as he says and don't complain. (He sounds more like mother and father every day. ~~How did I never notice that? How have I let him get away with it for so long?~~)

So it'll be the last time. I'm going to tell him we're over for real. I just need a little more.

Just so I can get through dinner with mother and father tomorrow ~~and what happens after~~. Then I'll be done. I'm not going to let him use me anymore. I'll get better, and I'll get my wand back, and I'll convince mother to give me some of my inheritance money and then I can find somewhere to stay far away from here. I'll finally be free for real—free from Tom, and from mother and father, and Theo, and from the stupid press and all of the pricks who think they own me just because I let them fuck me."

There are more entries after that, just a smattering few, and more pages torn out, ink stains and tear splotches and even some blood smears, like other-Harry had been gripping the book with hands that were scraped and bloody.

Harry can't read anymore. He slams the journal shut, shoving it back into the chest, and tries to corral his ragged breathing.

He had suspected, and had feared that the other Harry was unhappy. He had wondered if the sorts of things he had heard from Tom and from his parents were half-truths, not complete reality, and now he has it in writing. His heart aches for the other version of himself. Even in the right universe, the universe he *belonged* in, other-Harry had clearly felt utterly alone. He had needed help, had been crying out desperately for it, but no one had heard him. No one had cared enough to look closer and see what was really wrong.

Not even Tom.

You are distressed, Azim remarks.

Harry looks down at the snake coiled around his wrist. He can't find the words to respond. Instead, he scrubs a hand over his face and then closes the chest, locking the journal up safely inside and stows it on a low shelf, behind a stack of old sweaters he never wears. He can't finish it now. He doesn't want to see how it ends. Not unless he wants to push himself into another panic attack that sends Bitsy running to him.

Will you sleep now? Azim asks as they exit the closet, and Harry shakes his head.

Not yet, he answers, putting on his house slippers and layering a thicker robe over his dressing gown. He grabs a bit of parchment and a quill from his desk, opens the door to his chambers, and quietly slips out into the hall.

***

The owlery is on the other end of the top floor, in the complete opposite direction from where Harry had accessed the roof. It's a large, wide-open space, with high rafters and various perch spots for birds. It's only a fraction of the size of the Hogwarts owlery, but it's plenty of room for the three owls that are currently perched near the window, as if about to take flight for some evening hunting.

And there—right beside a large tawny owl—is one that looks exactly like Hedwig.

"Hey girl," Harry breathes. Hedwig seems pleased to see him. She coos and flutters her wings slightly and dips her head, like she's ready for a delivery.

Harry stretches out his hand and pets her gently, feeling her soft feathers and lightly tapping at the tip of her beak. Hedwig hoots again and Harry registers the feeling of thick, hot tears

slipping over his cheeks. It feels like it was just yesterday, that fateful flight from Privet Drive when Hedwig took a killing spell intended for Harry.

“Can you deliver something for me?” he asks quietly, feeling almost ashamed when she shoots him a disapproving look. “I know, I know I’m… not allowed. But it’s, erm. It’s not for Theo, or Draco, or anyone bad alright? It’s just for Sirius—” he coughs. “Siri, I mean. Could you take it to him, please?” he takes a few treats from his pockets and feeds them to her, laughing when she snatches them out of his palm like she’s starving.

“There you go. I’m sorry I haven’t been up to see you. It’s been—well, it’s been a very strange few months. I’ve been… I haven’t been well.” Harry caresses one of Hedwig’s wings and sighs. “I’m doing better now, though. I think. So don’t worry about me, alright?”

Hedwig coos. Harry smiles tremulously and gives her another treat. Then he pulls the parchment from his pocket and a quill, a bottle of ink, and drafts a quick note.

~~Padfoot~~

~~Sirius~~

Dear Siri,

he writes hesitantly.

How are you? It’s been a while. ~~I miss you.~~ I’d like to come and see you sometime. A lot’s happened in the past few months. If you’re in town, maybe I could come and visit?

I’m not sure if I’ve told you, but my wand’s been confiscated so I can’t go out on my own without one of Tom’s aurors. But if you were with me, it might be alright?

~~We could go flying~~

We could go shopping, or do something else fun. Let me know.

-Harry

Harry agonizes over the note for a ridiculous amount of time.

He knows that his handwriting isn’t going to be an exact match. He tries to replicate the messy, looping cursive as closely as he can and hopes it’s enough. He doesn’t even know if other-Harry was on good enough terms with Sirius to request something like this. He supposes he’ll just have to wait and see what sort of response he gets, if any.

Harry knows he’s taking a great risk. And he knows that he might get in trouble for this, but he doesn’t want to wait and ask for permission, because he’s afraid that Tom will say no. And Harry won’t be able to accept that. He can’t live with the knowledge that his godfather exists in this world and then not reach out.

He has to see for himself. He has to know if other-Harry had at least one person who cared about him in this world. He has to see if Sirius will be there for him.

Hedwig takes flight the second he finishes tying the parchment around her leg. Harry watches her fly through the air until the sight of her white wings fades into the distance. And then he stays there, up in the owlery for as long as he can, settled into a worn-looking wicker chair and staring up at the dark sky through the open window.

(He wonders briefly if there are wards on this window, too, but he pushes the thought away. He can't let himself fall back into that dark place he was in when he looked down at the ground from the roof and wanted to jump.)

"Master Harry?"

Harry jumps to his feet. He whirls around to see Bitsy staring at him, her eyes like saucers. She glances from him to the open window, to the crumpled bits of parchment, and then back to him.

"Wait, it's not—"

"Master Harry promised," she starts, her eyes already welling up, and Harry rushes toward her.

"No, Bitsy," he says quickly. "I was just sending a letter. Okay? I wouldn't. I promised you I wouldn't."

Bitsy bursts into tears. Harry goes down on his knees and she collapses into his arms, trembling, and he pats her back, trying to be comforting.

"Master Harry promised he would tell Bitsy," she cries.

"I know," Harry says quietly. "I will. I'm not going to, Bitsy, but if I was, I promise I'd tell you first."

"Bitsy has to know, so that she can make a cushioning charm," she sniffs. "Master Harry isn't sneaking off to do it himself."

Harry sighs. "I won't," he says again. "Of course, I won't. You don't have to worry about me, Bitsy."

"Bitsy is worrying always," she says thickly, rubbing her face on Harry's shirt, and he's certain he'll find snot on it later. "Bitsy is worrying for Master Harry every second of every day."

Harry's breath stutters. He feels suddenly like his heart is being squeezed very tightly. He wonders if Bitsy has always worried about Harry a little, even before, when he was other-Harry and apparently always being rude and bratty and causing problems and all the while suffering silently. He wonders if Bitsy knew that something was wrong. Maybe she tried to help, and the other Harry wouldn't let her. Or maybe she believed what they all believed, and she had thought it wasn't worth the effort. "I was just writing a letter," he says eventually. "I'm trying to be good now, remember?"

Bitsy sniffs again and then leans back to look at him shrewdly.

“Master Harry isn’t meant to send letters,” she says, a bit reproachfully. “Master Harry is not to speak with Master Nott, the bad man who is rude to Bitsy and gets Master Harry in trouble —”

Harry grimaces. “I know,” he says. “But it was just for Siri. Is… is that alright?”

She seems a bit mollified and after a moment of reflection, shrugs.

“Are you going to tell Tom?” Harry asks.

Bitsy scowls, then. She clambers out of his arms and then points a crooked finger at the floor, like she is pointing directly to Tom’s exact location. “Master Riddle is being mean to Master Harry, and is not listening, and Bitsy is tired of it,” she says, matter-of-fact. “Bitsy is not going to tell on Master Harry, as long as he is safe. She likes Master Harry more than she likes Master Riddle.”

Harry lets out a startled laugh, and feels immensely relieved.

“Brilliant. Thank you,” he says.

Bitsy takes his hand in hers and tugs him out of the owlery.

“Master Harry is staying away from open windows, and he is returning to his chambers now, because it is nighttime and he smells of owl droppings and he is needing another bath already, even though Bitsy gave him one three hours ago.”

“What?” Harry protests in vain, allowing himself to be forcefully guided back to his chambers. “Bitsy, I don’t smell like droppings—”

“Master Harry must not lie, or Bitsy is not letting him have any treacle tart tomorrow.”

Harry shuts his mouth.

Chapter End Notes

TWs for this chapter:
This is a long list! I just didn't want to miss anything. The majority of these warnings are for the excerpts Harry reads about other-Harry in his journal and are not explicitly detailed.

-Implied/referenced suicidal ideation and discussion of past suicide attempt
-Implied/referenced child abuse
-References to unsafe/unhealthy sexual dynamics and unhealthy/abusive relationships
-Implied past rape/non-con and extremely dubious consent in a relationship
-Implied past painful/rough sex
-Mentions of past illicit drug use/implied drug issues

Summary:
In other-Harry's journal he directly references having been abused as a child without going into detail. He admits that he knows he is being "used" by Theo. He says that Theo often ignores his wishes and continues hurting him and being rough during sex even when Harry says no. Harry also hints that he is struggling with drug abuse and that Theo is the one who typically supplies him with drugs, in order to further use and manipulate him. He details a sexual encounter with a stranger where the man choked him until he passed out. Harry then admits this has happened to him on multiple occasions. He details the ensuing fight with Tom where Tom threatened to end the marriage, Harry threatened suicide, and Tom didn't take that threat seriously.

Thank you all again for the continued support and so many amazing comments! <3 <3 <3 Not a lot of action in this one but I hope y'all enjoyed it!

Chapter 14: 14

Chapter Summary

Harry steals a wand and deals with a bully.
(OR: morally grey Harry enters from stage right, causes an absolute ruckus, and then exits stage left)

Chapter Notes

TWs for this chapter in the end note, and a couple of new tags added to the fic overall. This is another rough one so please check them out if you need to.

This chapter also ends on a !! cliffhanger !! so keep that in mind and if you don't want to deal with that, PLEASE please wait for me to post the following chapter lol <3 there's a whole lot that goes down, and comfort/resolution won't be until next time so just keep that in mind.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A few days pass, and Sirius still hasn't responded to his letter. But it's okay, Harry thinks, because it had sounded like his godfather—

(Not his godfather, no, not in this universe, Harry reminds himself fiercely)

—was somewhere halfway across the continent and maybe not in a position to be receiving mail. And Harry has checked the owlery every day since he sent Hedwig off, and she still hasn't returned. He is holding out hope.

So with the hope of distracting himself, of finding something else to do besides moping around the manor and bothering Bitsy, Harry had (quite nervously) asked if he could accompany Tom to work, and Tom had looked as though Christmas came early.

"Of course," he had said, looking extremely taken aback but extremely pleased. "Are you certain? I have quite a bit of work to get through tomorrow. It will not be very exciting. And I know that last time, you were rather upset afterwards—"

"I'm certain," Harry had said quickly. He hadn't wanted to be reminded of his painful conversation with Hermione. He had forced a casual smile. "I just, er. I want to get out of the manor for a bit. Is that… you really don't mind if I come along?"

“Not at all,” Tom had said. “I would enjoy your company. And perhaps afterward, dinner?”

“Okay, yeah, dinner,” Harry had repeated, nodding, a bit confused. Wasn’t that what they did every evening?

Tom had smiled with a fond, exasperated look. “Somewhere nice, I meant,” he had corrected. “If you’d like? Let me take you out.”

“Oh,” Harry had said, and then had flushed. “Oh. Okay. Yeah.” He had rubbed the back of his neck and tried to will his face to return to normal. He had carefully avoided his husband’s eye.

Tom had cleared his throat and had also seemed slightly flustered. “Right,” he had said. “Then it’s settled.”

“Right,” Harry had parroted back, and then had rushed out of the room, scrambling onto his bed so that he could scream into his pillow.

-

Tom kissed Harry nearly two weeks ago, and they haven’t spoken of it since. Haven’t acknowledged it. But Harry can hardly even look his husband in the eye now without blushing. Every time they are within proximity of each other, Harry starts to think about the feel of their mouths pressed together. His skin starts to tingle, his heart races, and the back of his neck heats.

Where he used to avoid Tom because he was terrified, he now avoids the man because he’s afraid that he *wants him too badly.* He wants Tom to pull him close and wrap his arms around him and kiss him until he’s breathless and hard and aching.

Which is—wrong, because—it’s Tom, *Tom Riddle,* Voldemort—

(Not Voldemort, no, not in this world, just Tom Riddle, handsome thirty-something minister of magic and Harry’s husband, would it really be so wrong to just enjoy something for once—)

And Harry shouldn’t be feeling these kinds of things. Certainly not after how Tom treated Harry, and how he treated the other-Harry. He shouldn’t be enjoying things in this world that were a source of distress for his counterpart. He shouldn’t find the thought of spending the rest of his life in this manor with Tom so—

Tempting.

But Harry just can’t help it. There’s some sort of magnet in his chest, right beside his heart, and everytime Tom looks at him or smiles or runs a hand through his hair, Harry feels himself

helplessly drawn closer. And sometimes when he's lying in bed after a particularly harrowing nightmare, he thinks of the night that Tom had brought him in out of the rain and had crawled into bed with him and held him close, keeping him warm until morning. And on those nights, all Harry can think about is how cold he feels, and how easy it would be to wander his way through the manor until he finds Tom's room and slips inside, sneaks into the man's bed, and begs to be held again.

Instead he drinks the dreamless sleep Bitsy brings him, and he reads his books about Occlumency and time travel and reincarnation and a million other topics, and he pretends that he is not beginning to hope, in the back of his mind, that maybe he won't ever find his way back to his old life.

-

And so Harry, distracted as he is with hopeful thoughts of Sirius and odd, conflicted feelings about Tom, is entirely unprepared to run into the ex-paramour of the other-Harry. In fact, Theodore Nott is the absolute last thing on Harry's mind when he grows bored of sitting in Tom's office and decides he wants to explore the ministry.

He yawns and sets down his sketchbook, shrugging out of his sweater and hanging it over the back of the chair. He feels idly around his neck and then his wrist, expecting to feel Azim's cool scales, and then remembers that the little snake had requested to be left at home for the day.

Harry had been disappointed, but he figured it was probably exhausting to have to spend every waking moment wrapped around someone's limb. Especially with the endless, relentless pacing he had been doing nonstop over the past few days. He had placed the little snake in the windowsill of his room, so that Azim could bask in the warm sunlight, and he had watched as he stepped away and Azim's movements had slowed, growing sluggish, and then had stopped, and grown unnaturally still.

"Is he alright?" Harry had asked, alarmed, and then had jumped and let out an undignified squeak when Tom had rested a comforting hand on the small of his back.

"He is perfectly fine," Tom had said.

"Does it, er. Do you think it hurts, or does it feel like—"

"It is much like hibernation," Tom had said. "Azim is made of magic. He can absorb some energy from his contact with you, of course, but he has his own magical core, one that I

created when I made him. When he grows weary, it simply means he needs some time to rest and recharge."

"Oh," Harry had said. He had watched the snake for a while longer, eyes scanning it intently, still feeling a bit worried.

"I explained all of this when I presented him to you, you know," Tom had said gently, and Harry had grimaced.

"I'm sorry," he had said. "Must've forgot."

"Right," Tom had said teasingly. "Forgot. Or just weren't listening in the first place."

Harry had rolled his eyes. "You think the worst of me," he had huffed, and then gone completely still, his face going white. "I'm sorry."

But Tom had only laughed. He had seemed delighted. "I have done that quite a bit lately, haven't I?" he had mused, a bit rueful. "I'm sorry, love. You're right."

Harry had flushed, and hadn't known how to respond.

-

Tom glances up at him from his desk now and raises an eyebrow.

"I'm going to, er," Harry pauses. "I mean, can I, erm…" he pauses again and revises. "Would you mind terribly if I—"

"By all means," Tom says with a bit of a weary sigh. "If I weren't confined to this desk, I would join you. They're serving roast chicken in the canteen this afternoon, why don't you go and grab a plate? Stretch your legs a bit, find a way to entertain yourself in this soulless prison."

Harry's eyes widen and he nods. He hadn't realised that Tom had picked up on his fondness for that specific food. The knowledge makes him feel odd— makes his stomach flip.

"Okay," he says. "But do I have to, er." Harry glances outside the door and looks at the auror standing guard in the hallway.

Tom looks up again and seems faintly chagrined. "I'm sorry, but yes, I have to insist upon their presence."

Harry clenches his jaw a bit and nods, staring at the floor.

“I trust you,” Tom says gently. “I do, Harry. This is just a precaution, as I’ve said before. I have—” Tom cuts himself off, and he seems a bit angry for a moment. “I have recently spoken with your father about returning your wand. He does not, as of yet, see that as a real possibility.”

Harry’s eyes dart up and he gapes at Tom. “You have?”

Tom frowns. “It’s been long enough, hasn’t it? And I think you’ve more than paid for that mistake.”

Harry blinks, utterly taken aback. “You—” he hesitates. “You really asked him?”

Tom’s face twists a bit and he frowns some more, looking down at his desk at a huge stack of paperwork. “Of course I did,” he says quietly. “I should have a long, long time ago, Harry. My treatment of you has been abhorrent. So please, do not look at me like that. Do not thank me.”

“Well,” Harry starts. He fidgets there by the door, staring at his husband whose shoulders are hunched and his face drawn, like he is waiting to be reprimanded. “I appreciate it, anyway,” he finally says, smiling gratefully.

Tom is the one to gape at him, then, his eyes wide and his cheeks a bit flushed. He stares at Harry’s face and at his mouth and he flushes deeper. “Of course,” he says again. “I am only sorry for your father’s unwillingness to compromise. Should he continue putting it off, we will simply go and purchase you a new wand. Would that be acceptable?”

Harry is nodding avidly before the man even finishes speaking. “Yes, please, thank you,” he says, scrubbing at his face and trying to will the overwhelmed tears to go back into his eyes. “That would be—yes, that would be *brilliant.”*

“Well,” Tom says. He seems flustered. “Alright, then. It’s settled. Take Auror Williams with you for now. I’m hoping to conclude with my work here in the early afternoon so try to find your way back here by then or sooner, okay love?”

Harry stammers out a half-intelligible response, going red at the utterance of yet another term of endearment, and hurries out the door.

-

He had forgotten just how large the ministry was. Harry wanders around for a while, stretching his legs, trailing down hallways with dozens of doors, owleries, and storage closets. He goes up and down the lift, stopping on any floors that seem interesting.

He tries to ignore the auror always one step behind him.

Auror Williams is tall and broad, stoic, with a carefully trimmed beard and dark eyes. He seems ambivalent about his guard duties, but he doesn't seem to mind following Harry all over the place. And anytime Harry stumbles, or gets a bit turned around, or anytime someone gets too close, the auror steps to Harry's side and wraps a careful arm around his elbow, guiding him to a safer spot.

He wishes it could be Ron, but Harry has been afraid to mention his friend's name. He doesn't want to seem too eager, or rouse suspicion. He doesn't want to risk Ron being taken off of guard duty entirely.

And it's nice, in a way, because if he can pretend that there is no auror dogging his footsteps, Harry almost feels like he's been trusted to go off on his own. Nobody bothers him, nobody stops him to talk, and no one takes any pictures.

(He supposes that is likely thanks to Tom's influence, and thanks to the presence of the auror, but he pretends that it's because he's invisible, and no one can see him or touch him. It's more fun to think of it that way.)

Harry sees the signs leading the way to the canteen, but he's still full from the breakfast Bitsy had forced him to eat that morning and so he dawdles quite a bit on the way, trailing his hand along the wall and peeking into rooms filled with ministry employees sitting at desks, hunched over scribbling at parchment, or chatting with each other, or idly flicking their wands, shooting paper plane memos into the air.

Being here in the ministry reminds Harry so much of Ron and Hermione that he nearly feels sick. It feels like ages ago now that they snuck in with those polyjuice disguises and stole the locket from Umbridge.

Harry had tried again, to speak with Hermione this morning, after she stopped by to give Tom his daily itinerary. But she had only spared him a glance, a half-smile, and her eyes had been cold. She had informed Tom that she would be in the lower levels for the majority of the day, organizing paperwork, and so he would have to send for her if he needed anything.

-

He's wandering down another long hallway, heading toward a bit of light at the end that he thinks might be a window, when there's an odd sound, like muggle gunfire, so loud it makes Harry's ears hurt, and then the corridor is plunged into utter darkness.

And then Harry feels an arm wrap around his elbow. He thinks maybe it's Auror Williams, and he relaxes for a moment but then there is a sharp tug at his navel, a discomforting squeezing sensation, and then Harry finds himself pressed against what feels like a bookshelf, and—

"Took you long enough," Theo growls.

"What—" Harry chokes out when he starts to get ahold of his bearings. "How did you—? Did you just *apparate us?"*

"Of course," Theo says, breathless. "Draco figured out inner-ministry apparation ages ago, Harry. You know that. And good fucking thing he did. Couldn't have shaken off that stupid bodyguard without it. How much time d'you think we have?"

Harry instantly begins to panic. He struggles against Theo's grip but the man reacts instantly, gathering Harry's wrists in one hand and shoving them up against the bookshelf over Harry's head.

"Stop," Harry says. His hands are numb. He feels, with a sense of dawning horror, like he's right back at that ministry party again, frozen and helpless. "Stop, Theo. Just—you can't, I don't want—"

Theo kisses him hard, knocking their teeth together, shoving his tongue into Harry's mouth. He squeezes Harry's wrists and Harry jerks, trying to yank them away, knowing that they will bruise.

"Of course you want this," Theo says between kisses. "Why else did you come here, hm? Surely not to play lapdog with your husband all day. Missed me, didn't you?"

"No," Harry says through gritted teeth. "Get off, Theo. You— I was supposed to stay with the auror! You can't just— you can't just fucking *whisk me away,* that's not—"

Theo moves his free hand up, digging it through Harry's curls and yanking at them painfully until Harry cries out, his eyes watering.

"I can do what I want, can't I?" Theo hums. He yanks even harder, and squeezes Harry's wrists, and Harry feels the delicate bones grinding over each other.

"No," he denies again.

"You said I could," Theo says. "You begged for it on your knees. Like a desperate, lonely little whore."

Harry makes a choked sound, trying to shake his head, and he thinks of other-Harry's journal, the scribbled pages, the tear splatters, and he feels nauseous.

Theo finally releases his grip on Harry's curls and instead reaches down to fiddle with Harry's pants, undoing the button and—

"Stop," Harry says again. "This isn't — *don't touch me!"*

Theo doesn't listen.

And Harry doesn't understand *at all.*

Even if other-Harry had actually wanted this, even if he had told Theo he could hurt him and it was okay, hadn't they at least talked about it? Hadn't they agreed on — some sort of way to check in with each other, for if things went too far? If Theo hurt Harry too much? And if they hadn't, what was the point? What was Harry supposed to gain from this? Did Theo not care one whit about Harry's feelings on the matter? Was this really what other-Harry thought he needed? Was it not enough to say no, to say stop it, to say don't touch me? And if that wasn't enough, what else could Harry even do? How could he communicate in a way that Theo would understand?

Theo is working his hand down into Harry's pants when Harry, for lack of what else to do, throws his head forward as hard as he can, bashing their foreheads together with a painful *thunk.*

"Fuck," Theo swears, releasing his grip on Harry and staggering backward, clutching at his head. "You stupid cunt. Why'd you do that?"

"I said don't fucking touch me," Harry snarls, curling his hands into fists. His own head aches, but he ignores the pain and keeps his focus on Theo. "You can't keep doing this. We're through. I don't want to see you. You're not going to hurt me anymore."

Theo laughs harshly. "Yeah, right. You can't bloody well be serious."

"I bloody well am," Harry says, squaring his jaw, scowling at the man.

Theo's eyes are wild suddenly, furious. "You're done, are you? That's what you think?" He shoves a hand into the pocket of his robes, pulling out a packet of white powder and dangling it in Harry's face. "You think you're better than me? Who else is going to take care of you, hm?"

"I don't need *anyone* to—" Harry starts hotly.

"I know daddy cut you off. I know your bitch of a husband won't give you any money. I don't know who's been supplying you the past few months, but I'm guessing they finally grew tired of your endless whinging and turned you away. Admit it. You need me."

"I don't do that stuff anymore," Harry says coolly, feeling like there is an angry dragon coiled inside him just beginning to wake, with sharp teeth and claws and fiery breath. He thinks of other-Harry again, and he thinks of the feel of Theo's hands, and his condescending words, and he feels positively murderous. "I don't need it, and I don't need you. I *never* have."

Theo scoffs. “That’s rich. I know you’ll come crawling back to me once you get sick of yourself. How long did it take last time, hm? A week? Two?”

Harry shoves angrily at the little bag of powder Theo is still dangling in front of him and it goes flying, spilling out onto the floor between them, and Theo lets out a shout of outrage.

“You bitch,” he swears, his face white. He glares at Harry. “You’ll pay for that.”

“Don’t touch me,” Harry bites out, backing up a bit, but his back only meets the bookshelf behind him. He darts his eyes around the room. He has no idea where they are in the ministry, and has no idea of whether Auror Williams will be able to find them. “Don’t you fucking touch me. I said we’re done.”

Theo lunges for him.

Harry tries to dart out of reach but Theo grabs his shirt, yanking him abruptly backward and making him stumble to his knees. Harry tries to crawl away, to scramble to his feet but Theo clamps a heavy hand over his neck, restricting his breath and shoving his face down into the cold, unforgiving floor beneath them. Theo’s knee presses down on Harry’s back, and then his wrists are pressed together again, yanked behind his back until his muscles are screaming for relief, and then Theo’s hot, harsh breath is in his ear.

“You really need this, don’t you?” he murmurs, slightly out of breath. “It’s been too long. I know you’re aching for it. You need me to be extra rough this time, hm? You don’t need the spells, do you? You can take it.”

“No! Get off me,” Harry growls, bucking against his hold but he can’t get free.

And they’re not right outside a crowded ballroom this time. There are no photographers, nobody to find them, and Harry doesn’t even know where they are in the ministry. He doesn’t know how far Theo is going to go.

(Harry’s *not* the other-Harry. He’s never done this before. He’s not ready. He doesn’t want it to hurt. He doesn’t want it to be forced. *He doesn’t want it to be with Theo.*)

“Oh, shut up,” Theo says in response to Harry’s distress. He sounds almost fond. “You’ll feel better after this. You’ll quiet down once you get what you need. You always do.”

He presses Harry’s face even harder into the floor and then rubs the pad of one thumb over the side of his neck, in a cruel mockery of intimacy. Harry makes a strangled sound and jerks beneath him.

“Stop,” he rasps, tears stinging at the corners of his eyes. “Stop, Theo—please—”

Theo tightens his grip, cutting off even more of Harry’s air supply, and laughs. “Alright, no more teasing. You’re always in such a rush, aren’t you? Need little whore.”

He keeps Harry’s wrists tightly together in one hand and then with the other fumbles with Harry’s pants, trying to tug them down over his hips.

“No, no, no, stop—”

“You don’t get to decide,” Theo says, all of a sudden sounding cold and furious. He squeezes Harry’s wrists tighter and yanks up, wrenching his shoulders and making him cry out. “You don’t decide when we’re done. *I’m* in control. I decide when we’re through. Do you understand?”

Harry doesn’t respond, and Theo snarls, wrapping his hand back around Harry’s neck. He presses down hard, squeezing the column of Harry’s throat, and Harry’s cheek begins to ache against the floor. He can’t breathe. He can’t move. He’s utterly pinned.

“Do you understand?” Theo repeats. “Answer me, Harry.”

Harry grits his teeth. He feels tears leaking from his eyes onto the floor beneath him. “Yes,” he croaks.

“And so what do you have to say for yourself?”

Harry takes in a shuddery, rasping breath, and Theo lessens the pressure on his neck just enough for him to not pass out.

“I’ll be good,” Harry rasps. “I’ll be—” he coughs.

“I don’t know if I believe you,” Theo muses. He shifts, moving closer. “You’ve been very ungrateful, haven’t you? After I worked so hard to get you here. I thought you’d be pleased. I thought you’d reward me.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry forces out.

“Not good enough,” Theo says in a sing-song tone that makes Harry want to vomit. He squeezes his eyes shut and tells himself he needs to quit panicking. He needs to get out of this before Tom finds him and he gets in trouble again.

He needs to think like the other-Harry.

So then he goes entirely limp. He stops struggling. He can’t stop his elevated heart rate, or his shuddering gasps for breath, but he falls as silent as he can and— then he forces himself to let out a soft, breathy, needy *whine* that has Theo instantly softening his grip around Harry’s wrists.

“Yeah?” he murmurs. “You ready to be good, baby? You need me?”

Harry tries to nod, although he can’t move his head much with Theo’s hand crushing his windpipe. “Please,” he whispers. He squirms beneath the man and lets out another needy whine.

Theo groans. He slides his hand up from Harry’s nape and into his hair, tugging lightly, and presses his lips to Harry’s neck.

Harry fights back the urge to vomit. Instead he shivers, exhaling breathily, and feels the tight grip around his wrists loosen even further. “Please,” he says again, low and desperate, and Theo chuckles.

“There you go. You always come around eventually,” he says. He releases Harry’s wrists entirely and turns him over onto his back, shoved to the floor with Theo hovering over him. Theo leans in and presses their mouths together.

Harry lets it happen. He brings his arms up around the other man, circling around his waist as if to pull him closer.

“Fuck,” Theo groans. His breath is warm and cloying on Harry’s face. “Missed this. You’ve been cooped up in that bloody manor, haven’t you? You probably need it more than I do.”

Harry doesn’t respond. He just lets out a whimper, staying pliant and obedient beneath Theo, and lets his hands travel from Theo’s chest to his hips and then lower.

He feels the outline of Theo’s wand in his back pocket.

“You’re trying to get out of your punishment, hm?” Theo says, distracted and out of breath, speaking his words muffled into Harry’s skin. “You think if you moan pretty for me, I’ll let you off easy?”

Harry slides his hand into Theo’s pocket just as Theo grabs him around the throat and presses their lips together again.

Harry curls his fingers around the wand, hoping against all hope that it will work for him, that he will be able to coax something out of it, that he’ll be able to use magic for the first time since he woke up in this strange world.

The stick grows warm in his hand, vibrating slightly, and Harry grins.

He feels something hot and vibrant course through him.

He feels strong. He feels *alive.*

He points the tip of the wand directly to Theo’s hand that’s still wrapped around his throat. *“Relashio,”* he croaks, flinching as a jet of hot, purple sparks erupts from the wand and splatters across Theo’s hand, and Harry’s neck and cheek.

Theo swears and instantly lets go, clutching his hand. “Fuck, Harry, what the actual *fuck?* Are you insane—”

Harry doesn’t wait for Theo to get his bearings. *“Flipendo,”* he snarls, and Theo is thrown off him, his body flipping violently through the air until he slams into one of the dusty bookshelves and crumples to the floor in a heap.

Theo groans. “Harry— why’d you— fuck, why’d you do that— I’m gonna *kill you,* you fucking cunt—” his words are slurring, and he’s trying to sit up but Harry climbs to his feet,

stalking over and then shoving Theo back down. He kneels on Theo's chest and points the wand directly between the man's eyes.

"Furnunculus," he growls.

Theo's wand shoots out an immediate jet of light and Theo's entire body erupts in large, painful-looking boils. Theo cries out and struggles beneath Harry, his eyes watering. "Harry," he whines, sounding a bit dazed. "Why'd you—wait, stop, that hurts, and— is that my wand? You're not supposed to do magic, your father took it for a reason, you know—"

"Shut up," Harry says coldly. He's still shaking, his heart rabbiting in his chest and he feels sort of numb, like this is all some kind of horrifying nightmare and is not really happening. But he's almost certain that it is, so he keeps the wand aimed firmly at Theo's face just in case. "You disgust me. You make me sick. I don't want to feel your dirty hands on me ever again."

Theo takes in a ragged breath. "You're just upset, Harry. Maybe… maybe I pushed you too hard. I'm sorry, alright? We can talk about it, we can work it out, just give me my wand and —"

"Shut up," Harry says through gritted teeth, "or I'll make you eat slugs." He jabs the tip of the wand into Theo's cheek.

"Harry," Theo wheezes. He reaches one hand up and fists the fabric of Harry's shirt. "Calm down. You're acting insane. You're having one of your episodes. I can help you, just—"

"You can't help me," Harry says with a laugh. "All you have *ever done* is hurt me. It's over, Theo. I need you to understand that. If you try something like this again, I'll fucking kill you."

Theo chokes out another breath and laughs. "No you won't," he says. "You don't have the guts. You need me too much. You can't live without me."

Harry's gaze darkens and his grip tightens on the wand. "You don't know what I need."

Theo laughs again, a sort of gurgling thing, and he moves his hand to Harry's hip, squeezing in a proprietary sort of way. "Yes, I do," he forces out, wincing at the feel of the wand still stabbing into his cheek. "You can borrow my wand if you want. You can go on a little power trip if you think that'll make you feel better. But at the end of the day you'll always come crawling back to me. No one else can give you what you need."

"Don't fucking touch me," Harry growls, slapping his hand away. "I'm not your pet, or plaything, or whatever the fuck it is you think I am to you."

"Maybe not today," Theo says. "Maybe not right this very moment. But you're mine. You think you can just move on? What, don't tell me you decided to start playing nice with your husband? And what will he say when he sees those pictures, hm?"

Harry's grip on the wand falters.

Theo grins sharply. “You’ve already forgotten, have you? I suppose you were pretty out of it. That’s a shame. You took me so beautifully that night. All spread out on my bed in your silk underthings.”

“Shut up.”

“I know you didn’t want me to take those pictures, but you agreed in the end, didn’t you?” Theo croons. “You always do. And I rewarded you for your obedience, didn’t I?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Harry snarls. He feels sick again. “I don’t care about any bloody pictures or whatever else you think you have on me. You think you can use that to control me? You’re sick. You’re fucked in the head.”

“Not as much as you are.”

“Shut *up.”*

“Maybe I’ll just call your daddy and let him handle you, hm?” Theo coughs wetly. Harry wonders faintly if the furnunculus curse was strong enough to affect the inside of his mouth and throat. “I’ll tell him you’ve been bad. I know he likes to punish you. That’s where you get it from, isn’t it? That cute little rebellious streak of yours?”

Harry doesn’t respond. He feels like he’s losing control of the situation again. He wants Theo to stop talking. He wants him to hurt. He wants him to go away forever. He wants him to feel exactly the pain and confusion and fear that Harry has experienced every day in this world. He wants him to *suffer* for the things he’s done to other-Harry.

“You won’t talk about it, but I’ve heard you whining in your sleep,” Theo goes on, oblivious to Harry’s inner turmoil. *“‘No, please father, please no more, please, I’ll be good,’”* Theo mocks, and then chokes out another laugh, fresh boils erupting all over his skin.

“Stop it,” Harry snarls.

“The best ones, though, are when you call for your mummy to help you,” Theo sniggers.

Harry squeezes his eyes shut. The wand grows warmer in his hand, and his chest tightens. He can’t breathe. “Stop talking, Theo, or I swear to god I’ll—”

“‘Mum, please, it hurts, tell father it’s enough, tell him I’ve learned my lesson,’” Theo says in a high-pitched, whiny voice, pretending to cry. *“‘I don’t want to die, please mum, I’ll be good, I’m your son, it was just one mistake, I just wanted to have some fun, how can you hurt me this much if I’m your only son—”*

Harry’s vision whites out. He’s not sure what happens or how he does it. He doesn’t remember uttering a spell.

(He didn’t even know there was a spell that could do something like this.)

But Theo’s face goes suddenly grey, his eyes bulging in shock, and his mouth gapes, overflowing with little things that are squirming, and—

Writhing, and—

Spilling out over his lips and it's—

Harry scrambles backward in horror, nearly dropping Theo's wand in his haste to get away from what is suddenly crawling out of the man's mouth.

Spiders.

Dozens of them.

Theo makes a choked sound, shoving his hands into his mouth, trying to force the arachnids out but they just keep coming. His breath is labored, his throat bulging, and he starts to make little panicked sounds, like his airway is blocked.

Harry stares at him.

A sick sense of satisfaction mixed with horror coils low in his stomach. He wonders how many spiders will come out. He wonders if Theo will die before they stop.

He wonders if he should try to help. But why should he?

(He doesn't think he wants to.)

-

"Mr. Potter?"

-

Chapter End Notes

chapter TWs:
-body horror (involving spiders, pertaining to the mouth/throat)
-sexual assault and attempted rape/non-con
-lightly implied/possible past bad bdsm etiquette/lack of safeword

-physical abuse/violence and references to past child abuse
-choking
-illicit drugs mentioned/present
-attempted forced submission
-attempted blackmail
-implied non-con filming during sex in the past
-derogatory language

quick-as-I-can summary:
Theo gets Harry alone at the ministry wanting a quick hookup. He grows angry when Harry repeatedly says no and tells Theo they're done. He taunts Harry with drugs and Harry knocks them out of his hand, spilling them on the floor. Theo attempts to force Harry to submit to him, eventually getting Harry on the ground and choking him. He threatens to rape Harry and implies that he has done this to other-Harry in the past and that other-Harry liked it. Harry pretends to give in so that Theo will let down his guard. Harry then steals Theo's wand and performs multiple defensive spells, injuring himself and Theo in the process. He threatens Theo and then Theo tries to manipulate Harry, referencing illicit photos he took of other-Harry without his consent during a past hook-up. When Harry doesn't take the bait, Theo goes on to threaten Harry with his parents, revealing that he knows something about their abuse and he taunts Harry with things other-Harry has said in his sleep. Harry performs unintentional/accidental magic in his rage and causes Theo's throat and mouth to overflow with spiders. Theo's airway is blocked and he can't breathe. Instead of calling for help, Harry stays there and watches it happen.

Thank you so much as always to everyone following along and commenting! The next chapter should be up in a few days. <3

Chapter 15: 15

Chapter Notes

see endnote for chapter TWs and little summary :)

I know I said a few days and it's been MANY days, I'm sorry :// thank you all for so much amazing and supportive feedback <3 I hope you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry jerks his head up and stares with wide eyes at Hermione, who is standing at the end of the aisle with her wand in one hand and a great stack of books in the other. Her eyes are fixed on Theo in horror.

“Hermione?” he says.

“Are those… *spiders?”*

Theo makes another choking sound, and Harry looks at him. The flow of spiders has not yet stopped, or even slowed.

Hermione drops her books into a heap on the floor and rushes to Theo’s side, pointing her wand at his throat. *“Anapneo,”* she says firmly. Theo jerks and groans, coughing hard, and for a moment he seems alright. He takes in a few uneven breaths. But then it starts again. Theo tries to speak, his eyes wide and pleading, tears spilling down his mottled cheeks, but only garbled sounds come out.

“That’s—odd,” Hermione says, her voice trembling a bit. She utters the spell a few more times, but each time only cuts off the flow momentarily. Her face pales and she seems utterly bewildered. “Mr. Potter,” she says again, and Harry turns his gaze toward her. “Did you do this?”

Harry nods.

“Do you know the counterspell?”

He shakes his head.

Hermione gapes at him. Harry feels uncomfortable and so he looks back to Theo. He watches more spiders crawl out from Theo’s throat. He wonders if it hurts.

(He hopes it does.)

“Why did you do it?”

Harry doesn't respond. He listens to Hermione as she mutters the same spell a few more times, to varying success.

(He likes the sound of her voice.)

"Mr. Potter," Hermione says yet again, but her tone sounds odd, and when he looks up, she is not looking at Theo anymore.

Her eyes are, instead, trained on Harry's trousers. Harry glances down to see that his button is still undone, and his shirt is torn, his wrists red and irritated. When he forces his eyes back up Hermione is staring at him, her eyes tracking across his stinging cheek and his neck, and the tension in her gaze has morphed into something far less accusing. "What happened?" she asks quietly.

Harry blinks back sudden tears and swallows hard. The more he tries to listen to Hermione, to answer her questions, the more he starts to come back down to earth and realize exactly what he's just done. "I don't know," he says. "I was… angry."

"Did he hurt you?" Hermione asks, her tone taking on a sense of urgency, and her eyes are bright when he looks up again.

"I…" Harry says shakily, his voice hoarse. "I… I don't…"

"Anapneo," she murmurs again, clearing Theo's airway for a moment so he can take in a gasping breath. Then she looks back at Harry. "Your skin is burnt," she says quietly, her eyes traveling over his face and neck. "Those marks…" she hesitates. "Did Theo do that to you?"

Harry doesn't respond.

Hermione's lips press together. *"Anapneo,"* she mutters again, her eyes darting toward Theo and then back to Harry. "Is there anything you can tell me about what happened here?"

Harry blinks at her. "I said no," he says slowly. "I said… don't touch me. But he didn't listen. He didn't stop. Why didn't he stop?"

Hermione's breath catches. Her face contorts. "This isn't working," she mutters again, sounding frustrated. She suddenly points her wand at Theo's chest. *"Petrificus Totalus."*

Theo's body goes rigidly still. His ragged breathing stops. The spiders keep coming.

"He'll be alright," Hermione says shakily. "He'll be fine. That should hold him until the aurors arrive." She looks Theo over once more, her lips pursed, and then makes her way carefully toward Harry. She kneels on the floor in front of him and tugs his chin gently up, turning his face this way and that to look at the bits of skin that were impacted by the ricocheting revulsion spell. They are still stinging. It feels a bit like a scattered sunburn.

"The aurors?" Harry asks.

"Yes, the aurors, and your husband," Hermione murmurs. She rubs the pad of her thumb carefully underneath Harry's eye, brushing away tears he hadn't realized were falling.

“Everyone’s been looking for you, apparently.”

“Oh.” Harry leans into her touch, his eyes drifting shut for a moment. Her palm feels soft on his cheek.

“How did you two get all the way down here?” she asks.

“Apparated.”

Hermione clicks her tongue. “Figures. Risking splinching, or worse, just for—what, a quick snog in the dust of the records section?”

Harry stares down at the floor at the powdered dragon’s claw that has spilled all over the place, and the little spiders running across it on spindly legs. He can still taste Theo’s mouth on his. He can feel his hand squeezing Harry’s neck, choking him, pulling his hair and tugging at his clothing. He tries to swallow, but his throat is dry and aching and all he can really do is work his jaw a bit, eyes watering.

(He thinks he would have probably preferred to be splinched.)

Hermione freezes. “Oh,” she says, sounding pained. “Oh, no, I didn’t—of course, I’m sorry —”

“I said no,” Harry tells her, forcing his gaze up, forcing himself to look her in the eye. His hand is still clutched tightly around Theo’s wand. His fingers have gone numb. “I said no. I did.”

“I’m sorry,” Hermione says again, sounding horrified.

He’s not sure why Hermione’s looking at him like that. He thinks maybe this is the first time in this world that she has looked at him without anger or disgust in her eyes. Instead she looks worried, and a bit disturbed, and she takes off her cloak, draping it over Harry’s shoulders.

Harry looks up at her. “I just… wanted him to stop talking,” he explains.

“Well,” Hermione says with a wry, nervous smile. “That’s one way to do it, I suppose.”

Harry frowns. He tries to look over at Theo again, but Hermione grips his chin and keeps his focus on her instead.

“Don’t worry about him,” she murmurs. “He’ll be alright.”

“I’m not worried for him,” Harry says.

Hermione’s expression tightens for a moment, her eyes widening, and then she nods a bit jerkily. “Right,” she says. “Okay.” She shuffles closer and wraps her arm around Harry’s shoulders, adjusting the cloak and smoothing down his tangled hair with her other hand. “Are you hurt anywhere else, Mr. Potter?”

Harry thinks about it. “I don’t know,” he mumbles. He reaches up with his free hand and prods at his neck, feeling at the spots where Theo’s hands had dug in, but Hermione grabs his hand, tugging it carefully away and lacing their fingers together.

“Anywhere else?” she asks. Her gaze darts down to his trousers again and her eyes darken. “Did he—”

Harry shakes his head. “No. No, I didn’t. I *wouldn’t.* I said no.”

Hermione inhales shakily and nods. “Alright, Mr. Potter.”

“I said no,” Harry says again, blinking rapidly and staring down at their entwined hands. “Didn’t I?”

“Yes,” Hermione says, her voice sounding oddly thick. She smooths another hand over his tangled curls, making Harry feel warm and shivery. “You did. I’m sure you did, Mr. Potter.” Harry flinches, and she somehow seems to understand, because in the next breath, she says, “Oh. Harry? I mean, of course. That’s… is that better? You’re… well, you’re going to be alright. We’ll tell Minister Riddle what happened, okay Harry? He’ll take care of it.”

Harry is still trembling. His chest feels tight, and everything hurts, and he lists forward, pressing his face needily into the crook of Hermione’s neck, inhaling her soft perfume and the scent of her shampoo.

(It smells just like the one the other-Hermione used. *Harry’s* Hermione. And isn’t that something?)

Hermione freezes for a moment, seeming startled, but she allows the contact. Her hand comes to rest tentatively on the small of Harry’s back.

Harry knows he should be terrified. He should be running, or finding somewhere to hide, and he should be thinking of what to say when Tom and the Aurors come. He should be ready to explain himself. He should be reviewing defensive spells so that he can be prepared to evade custody or torture or whatever it is that will happen when they all see what he’s done to Theo. But his thoughts are too scattered for that. And he’s so shocked to be held in this Hermione’s arms so willingly, her voice speaking quietly to him about something unintelligible, and Harry can’t help but to bask in it.

And so when the lights brighten around them, when there’s the sound of rustling cloaks and hurried footsteps, Harry stiffens, but doesn’t hide. He grips Hermione’s robes with one shaky hand, keeps Theo’s wand tightly gripped in his other, and braces himself.

There is first a long, heavy silence, and then someone utters a low oath. And then someone else is there at Harry’s side, their arm is coming to rest around his waist, and Harry jolts. He turns and looks with wide eyes at Tom, whose face is white with fury.

“Sir, it’s not how it looks—” Hermione tries.

“What happened?” Tom says coldly.

“Furnunculus Curse, most likely,” Auror Williams mutters, inspecting Theo’s prone body. “Along with a revulsion jinx performed on the right hand. These spiders…” the auror hesitates. “Another curse, I suspect, one I am not familiar with. And a full body-bind. I can rennervate him in a mo—”

“Wait,” Hermione blurts, twisting a bit, making as if to stand, and Harry’s heart lurches into his throat.

“Don’t,” he rasps, tightening his grip on her robes. “Please.”

Hermione instantly turns back, seeming flustered, and she smooths her hand once more over his hair. “I am not going anywhere,” she murmurs gently to Harry.

Harry sags with relief.

Hermione waits for Harry’s panic to fade before turning to address Auror Williams once more. “Do not revive him,” she says. “Not yet. I couldn’t, ah,” she hesitates, “I couldn’t stop the erm, the… spiders. As you can see. His airway is blocked. I repeatedly attempted *anapneo* to limited success. The body-bind was all I could think of to pause the suffocation, but I doubt it will hold for much longer. He needs to be taken to the curse ward at St. Mungo’s as soon as possible.”

There is another long silence.

“Tell me what you saw,” Tom demands. He pulls Harry even closer as he speaks, nearly onto his lap, until Harry’s back meets his chest. Harry shivers.

“I… I’m not quite sure, exactly,” Hermione stammers out. “I was gathering additional references for tomorrow’s budget meeting and I heard raised voices and some sort of commotion. There’s a very strict noise decree on this floor, of course, so I was coming over to manage the disturbance when I saw, erm. I saw…” her voice trembles and then dies out. She seems at a loss for words.

Tom speaks to Harry directly, then, and his tone of voice has greatly softened. “Can you look at me, darling?”

It takes Harry a moment, but he forces his eyes up to meet his husband’s. Tom’s brow is furrowed and his eyes a well of confusion and worry. He’s opening his mouth to speak when another auror cuts in. Harry jumps. He hadn’t realised there were additional aurors present.

“Clear signs of an unsanctioned wizard’s duel,” the auror says matter-of-factly. “They’ve damaged ministry property and performed illegal spells. Not to mention the apparation, which is widely prohibited inside the ministry and subject to severe fines *and or* a short stint in azkaban, according to wizarding degree number—”

“Harry does not carry a wand,” Tom interrupts stiffly. “Surely you can’t be suggesting—”

“He’s got one right there, hasn’t he?” the auror interrupts, speaking with a bit of a sneer in his tone. He gestures toward Harry. “The boy appears to have pilfered Mr. Nott’s wand.”

Harry chances another glance up at Tom, who doesn't seem to be listening to the other auror at all and is instead now staring at Harry's wrists, which are still red and irritated. A muscle in his jaw twitches. He adjusts Hermione's cloak, tucking it more carefully around Harry so his entire body is covered.

"I didn't…" Harry hesitates. He glances at the aurors, and then at Hermione, and then back at Tom.

"What's this, then?" the same auror muses, crouching down and prodding at something on the floor.

"Looks to be a bit of powdered claw," Auror Williams says slowly. "Dragon-grade."

"Illicit substances," the other auror says. "Something Mr. Potter here is quite familiar with, aren't you?"

Harry blanches.

"Silence," Tom hisses. His visage has darkened into something vicious. He ignores the aurors again and inspects Harry closely, resting his palm over Harry's uninjured cheek.

"I'm sorry," Harry mumbles.

"Hush," Tom says to him very gently. "Save your voice, darling. Your throat is swollen."

"The burns on Mr. Potter's face and neck are similar to the burn patterns on Mr. Nott's right hand," Auror Williams says. "They are likely defensive wounds, Mr. Riddle, sir. The revulsion charm is a popular one with victims of— "

"Defensive wounds," the other auror snorts derisively under his breath. "Not bloody likely. This is nothing more than another lover's spat. A great bloody waste of ministry resources and time."

"I said silence," Tom snarls. "You will hold your tongue, Brady, or you will be removed from your post."

Auror Brady falls into silent fuming.

"Harry," Tom says after a moment. "I am going to ask you some yes or no questions. You may nod or shake your head to respond, if you feel up to it. Is that alright?"

Harry nods.

Tom reaches down and curls his hand around Harry's wrist, the one that is still gripping Theo's wand very tightly.

"Is this Nott's wand?" Tom asks.

Harry nods.

“Did you take it from him?”

Another nod.

Auror Brady scoffs. “Told you, didn’t I? It’s as simple as—”

“For merlin’s sake, I said *hold your tongue,”* Tom snarls. He turns to Hermione. “Did you witness any of these spells as they were cast, Miss Granger?”

“No,” Hermione admits.

Tom looks back down to Harry. “Did you take his wand for protection, Harry? Did Theo hurt you?”

Harry hesitates. He looks at the aurors and then over at Theo, frozen on the floor, spiders still pouring out of his open mouth. He opens his mouth to respond, when Auror Brady speaks again.

“He likes that sort of thing, doesn’t he?”

“Brady,” Auror Williams warns, but Auror Brady talks over him.

“We all know *quite well* what the boy gets up to in his spare time. Doesn’t keep it much of a secret, does it? Splashed all across the Prophet every other weekend.”

Harry freezes.

“A bloody whore, isn’t he?” Brady goes on viciously. “Heard he’ll get on his knees for anyone. Likes when it hurts. Begs for more.”

Harry feels cold all over. He thinks of his father’s face and how it had felt to kneel on the ground and take the lashes until he bled. He thinks of how it had felt to have Theo’s hands all over him, shoving his face into the floor. And he thinks of the pages he had read, of other-Harry’s pain and humiliation and his pure desire to simply be understood and loved.

He doesn’t react when Tom carefully passes him back to Hermione, who tugs him all the way into her arms and holds him very tightly. He lets it happen, feeling empty and blank and numb inside when Tom stands, pulling out his wand and turning the full force of his fury on Auror Brady. Whatever the auror sees on Tom’s face makes him go white, his eyes wide with fear and he stumbles backward, fishing around in his robes for his wand but he’s backed up to a bookshelf, Tom’s wand in his face before he can do anything about it.

“I should cut out your tongue right now for making such vile comments,” Tom says.

“Cut out my—are you *mad?!* You can’t threaten an auror, that’s—” the auror’s blustering falls silent when Tom steps even closer, the wand leveled between his eyes.

“You will find,” he says calmly, “that I can do *exactly* as I please, when given the right motivation. You have insulted my husband, and in doing so have revealed the utter depths of

filth and depravity that reside in your mind. I do not need Legilimency to see that. And I *will not* have such men in my employ."

Auror Brady's eyes bug out. "You can't be serious! I'll file a complaint with—"

"You should consider yourself extremely lucky to have committed these transgressions on ministry property, surrounded by witnesses," Tom says through gritted teeth. "Or I could not promise the same level of restraint I am showing now. Get out of my sight. I want you out of this building *immediately.* Your personal effects will be sent to you by owl."

Tom lowers his wand dismissively and turns around, heading back toward Harry, and that is when Auror Brady begins to shout.

"This is a bloody *joke!* The man is covered in sores with a throat full of *spiders* and you're telling me you won't put Potter in custody? He should be facing criminal charges. He's mentally unhinged. You'd better take that wand out of his hand and dampen his magic before he kills someone."

Harry jerks, his magic flaring, skin tingling and he clutches the wand tighter, shrinking closer to Hermione, who is watching the proceedings with wide, disbelieving eyes.

Tom's face sharpens into something animalistic. He whirls around and stalks toward Auror Brady. "You forget yourself," he hisses.

Auror Brady smiles. "So that's all it takes to get off scot-free now? Should I get on my knees? If I let you bugger me, can I keep my job? Maybe even a promotion?" The auror's voice is taunting now, a cruel tint to his smirk, and his eyes are fixed on Harry, like he knows it's over but he wants to cause as much pain as possible before he's forced out the door. "Is that how it is? Potter's got you wrapped around his finger now, hasn't he? Does he keep it nice and tight for you? Does he take it quietly, like a good boy, or does he scream?"

"Silence," Tom seethes, surging toward the man and grabbing him around the throat.

"I've seen them, you know," the auror forces out, his words growing a bit mangled. "Nott, and Potter, getting it on. Don't think there's a room here in the ministry they *haven't* shagged in. Paid me a pretty penny to keep it quiet, didn't they?" He smiles meanly at Harry. "Mr. Nott even let me watch, so long as I kept my distance."

Harry shudders. He thinks he might vomit. Hermione's face colours and she makes a muted sound of outrage. "Don't listen to him, Mr. Potter," she murmurs.

"Maybe the boy will let me have a turn, too, if I ask nicely enough—"

"Oscausi," Tom growls.

Harry's breath catches. His heart lurches into his throat. He stares with wide, disbelieving eyes as the auror's mouth smooths over into skin and his screaming complaints go eerily silent. The man's eyes widen and he claws at the place where his mouth would go.

"I think that's quite enough," Tom says with a sneer.

Harry's vision goes fuzzy around the edges. He can't hear anything more but an odd ringing in his ears.

He reaches up a shaking hand and presses it to his mouth. He feels his lips, warm and dry and chapped, and he prods at his teeth, and his tongue, and the roof of his mouth, and then he carefully inhales and exhales, blowing a shaky breath out through his lips.

(Just to be sure.)

Tom turns away from the auror once more. He takes a step toward Harry and Hermione, his wand still in his hand, his face hard with violent, avenging fury, and he meets Harry's gaze. Tom opens his mouth and says something, coming closer, reaching out a hand to Harry, but Harry is already far gone.

-

"'—and now it was the time she had been looking forward to all week: fire-escape-sitting time. She put a small rug on the fire-escape and got the pillow from her bed and propped it against the bars.'"

Hermione's voice is warm and sharp, like freshly toasted bread, and Harry thinks hazily that perhaps he's back at the burrow, and Ron's outside flying broomsticks with Charlie, and Mrs. Weasley is cooking dinner in the kitchen, and Hermione is helping Harry complete his summer homework. And maybe everything else that has happened to him has been a dream. Maybe the war is over, and everyone's safe, and no one is going to hurt Harry or call him a whore or make him get on his knees.

"'—there was ice in the icebox. She chipped off a small piece and put it in a glass of water. The pink-and-white peppermint wafers bought that morning were arranged in a little bowl, cracked, but of a pretty blue color.'"

There is a quiet shuffling of paper and a sigh of breath. Harry inhales, and exhales, but he can't quite bring himself to move or open his eyes. He wants to stay in this warm, fuzzy space, where his best friend is speaking with a voice that doesn't sound cold, or hard, or angry.

"'She arranged glass, bowl and book on the window sill and climbed out on the fire-escape. Once out there, she was living in a tree. No one upstairs, downstairs or across the way could see her. But she could look out through the leaves and see everything.'"

Hermione pauses again and sniffs. She sounds close to him. In fact, Harry is quite sure that her slim hand is resting on his ankle. And when Harry breathes in and out again, he realises that he's resting in a reclined position on someone warm and firm that is breathing steadily with him, and their hand is dragging lazily through his curls.

Harry's throat is still aching. The more awareness he gains, the more he feels it. Each breath he takes in is raspy and strained. His wrists are stinging, his face and neck sore, and his mouth dry.

"'It was a sunny afternoon,'"

Hermione continues on as Tom lightly tugs on one of Harry's curls, unraveling a small tangle.

"'A lazy warm wind carried a warm sea smell. The leaves of the tree made fugitive patterns on the white pillow-case. Nobody was in the yard and that was nice.'"

Harry inhales again and his breath catches. He coughs, his entire body jolting, and Hermione's voice cuts off. Behind him, Tom sits up a bit, careful not to jostle Harry with his movements.

"Harry," he says gently. His hand moves down from Harry's curls and cups Harry's cheek. "Can you hear me?"

"Y-yes," Harry croaks, and then coughs again. He blinks rapidly, gaining more awareness of his surroundings. They're back in Tom's office, curled up on his settee with Hermione beside them, a large book open on her lap.

Harry looks down at himself. He is still holding Theo's wand very tightly, and his other hand is fisted in Hermione's robes. He tries to crane his neck to look at Tom behind him, but the movement irritates his throat and he winces.

"Hold still," Tom says quickly. He conjures a cup of water and holds it to Harry's lips. Harry drinks greedily, each swallow agitating his throat but he doesn't mind. And when Tom pulls the cup away Harry wants to fight for it, to ask for more, but he feels suddenly exhausted and slumps back.

"Sorry," he rasps, miserable.

"You have nothing to apologize for," Tom says. He drags his fingers through Harry's curls again, and Harry shivers.

"I did—" Harry coughs again, "I did magic, and—"

"You performed defensive magic under duress," Tom corrects him. His arm tightens around Harry's waist.

"He wouldn't stop," Harry says, swallowing thickly and then grimacing. "I said no and— and he wouldn't stop."

Tom carefully arranges Harry so he is sitting sideways on his lap. He rests his palm on Harry's cheek very gently and raises his face so their eyes can meet. And Harry hates himself for it, but he can't control his reaction. He shrinks back. He thinks again of cold words, and painful lashes, and a face with no mouth, no lips to scream from, no way to call out for help. He squeezes his eyes shut and jerks his face out of Tom's grasp.

"Minister, please, he's—" Hermione starts, sounding teary-eyed.

"I didn't mean to," Harry says, panicked, the words bubbling out of him. He lets go of Hermione's robes and instead clutches at the front of Tom's shirt, and Tom stares back at him in dismay. "I didn't, I—" his breath stutters. "I said no and he didn't listen. He didn't care. He tried to—he tried—"

"Minister," Hermione says again.

"He said I asked for it but I didn't," Harry babbles hoarsely. "I didn't! Please—you have to believe me. I'm sorry, I am, I won't do it again. I couldn't stop him, he kept, he was going to —" Harry's breath hitches and he dissolves into a coughing fit.

"You stopped him," Tom says calmly, dragging his fingers through Harry's curls. "He is in auror custody now, under surveillance at Saint Mungo's and facing charges for the possession of illegal substances and unlawful apparation. He will lose his position at the ministry and you will never have to see him again." Tom hesitates. "Should *you* decide to press charges, he may face an even longer sentence."

Harry stops short, some of his panic fizzling at Tom's words. "Press charges?"

"Yes," Tom says grimly.

Harry blinks dumbly at him. "Me?"

Tom works his jaw a bit, his eyes flashing, and then nods. "Yes, Harry."

"But I," Harry pauses and shakes his head. His brow furrows. "The auror, he said that I'm—" he goes pale. "Theo's in custody? I didn't kill him? The spiders, I don't even know how I—"

"He will *wish* he had perished if he comes near you again," Tom says, suddenly speaking harshly, furious, and Harry cringes back. "You should not waste a *single second more* of your time on that vile, rotten excuse of a—"

"Minister," Hermione says again, this time her voice sharp. She reaches over, adjusting a blanket that Harry didn't even realise was resting around his shoulders. He clenches his jaw to try and stop his magic from flaring again. He doesn't like the tone of Tom's voice, although he tells himself that Tom is not angry with him—he is angry with Theo.

It doesn't make him feel much better.

"I am simply—" Tom speaks through gritted teeth and then pauses, inhaling and exhaling, and some of the tension melts out of his frame. His eyes soften. "I apologize, Harry."

Harry stares at him with wide eyes. “I… I told him not to touch me, and he did anyway,” he says, trembling, running the fingers of one hand along the edge of the blanket. It’s the same one he likes to use when he visits Tom’s office and reads in the comfy armchair. It smells like honey and woodsmoke. “I told him we were over, and he said—it wasn’t up to me.”

Tom stiffens his arm like a vice around Harry’s waist.

Hermione rubs her thumb over Harry’s ankle. “It’s alright, Harry,” she says. “He won’t—”

“I told him to stop talking, and he wouldn’t listen,” Harry goes, gaining traction now, his chest heaving, his words speeding up. He shrugs out of their hold and scrambles off the settee, beginning to pace. “He called me a— *whore.* He pressed my face into the floor. He tried to—he was going to—he said I *needed* it—” Harry breaks off, breathing harshly, his hand going numb still wrapped around Theo’s wand. His chest feels tight and he rubs his free hand over it, trying to calm his racing heart.

“Harry—”

“He was wrong. I don’t need that. I don’t need him,” Harry goes on, whirling to face Tom to make sure he’s listening.

Tom stares back at him. A muscle in his jaw pulses. “Of course, Harry—”

“And I don’t know *how* I did it. The spiders. But—” Harry pauses and looks from Tom to Hermione, and then back to Tom. He squares his shoulders. “I don’t regret it. I’m not sorry for that. I’m *glad.* I hope it was painful. I hope that he suffered. I hope he *never* forgets how it felt.”

As Harry speaks, he watches as Tom’s eyes darken progressively into something hungry and wild and vengeful. “Oh, he will not forget,” he says. “Make no mistake, husband. I will ensure that he spends the rest of his miserable life paying dearly for how he’s treated you.”

Harry takes a shuddery breath in and then nods. “Good. That’s good.” He feels some tension ease out of his frame. He stumbles back a bit, resting against the front of Tom’s desk, exhausted.

Tom stands up then and practically prowls over to him, enfolding him back into his arms, his lips brushing over the top of Harry’s head, and Harry goes limp. He doesn’t struggle when Tom curls his hand around Harry’s wrist, the one that still has a death-grip on Theo’s wand. Tom makes no effort to take the wand, but he squeezes Harry’s wrist very gently, and Harry just *knows.* He feels himself stiffening again, his heart lurching, and he presses his lips firmly together and tries to stay calm.

Of course, they aren’t going to let him keep the wand. It’s not his wand, after all— it’s Theo’s.

Still, even though it’s nothing more than wishful thinking, Harry wants to keep it. He doesn’t want to lose this powerful feeling. He doesn’t want to go back to that powerless, defenseless Harry who moved about life like a ghost.

(He knows that it's not the wand that gave him that powerful feeling—not really. But it certainly helped. It was a reminder to Harry of what he is capable of. And is he really going to just give up one of the *only* advantages he has been able to gain in this world where everything and everyone is against him?)

"I am sorry," Tom murmurs.

"Don't take it," Harry murmurs back, pleading. He keeps his voice low. He knows that Hermione is still there, still perched on the settee behind them, and he is embarrassed. He wishes she wasn't here to witness this.

Tom makes a punched out sound, like a wounded animal. "I do not wish to take *anything* from you," he says, his tone just as pleading. "You must believe me in that. But it is not yours, Harry." He rubs the pad of his thumb over the soft inside of Harry's wrist. "And you do not need anything that belongs to that foul creature."

"I—" Harry hesitates. "But I *do* need it. Please—" he presses in close, his cheek rubbing over the soft fabric of Tom's shirt, and he closes his eyes. "Please, Tom."

Tom exhales shakily. He raises Harry's hand to his lips, pressing soft kisses over each of his knuckles. "You will have a wand," he promises darkly. "I don't care what your father says. I will take you to Ollivander's today, if you wish. You will not go defenseless any longer. But *this* wand—" Tom squeezes Harry's wrist again and then turns his hand, pressing his lips to Harry's skin. Harry's breath stutters and something low in his stomach flips. His grip on the wand loosens for what is probably the first time since he took it from Theo's pocket.

"It must be submitted for evidence," Tom says.

Harry exhales in a rush of breath, gritting his teeth, and then nods.

Tom grips his chin then, raising it so that their eyes meet, and he gives Harry a considering look. "You don't need it," he says again. "Not this wand, nor any wand. Don't you understand? You… you are powerful beyond measure, Harry."

Harry blinks rapidly and then tries to duck his head, feeling suddenly overwhelmed at the look in his husband's eye, but Tom pulls him back. "You cursed Nott with those spiders wandlessly and wordlessly," he murmurs, his tone fervent. "It was committed through sheer force of will and with pure magic."

"Accidental magic," Harry mumbles defiantly, but Tom shakes his head.

"That is what we will tell the aurors, yes," he hums. "But—make no mistake. That was no accident. A curse of that magnitude could only be cast deliberately. Your magic did exactly what you wished it to do. You implied so yourself, Harry, only a moment ago."

Harry gapes at him. "I just… I just wanted him to stop talking. That's all."

"I know," Tom says gently.

Harry feels ill again. He wishes that he had never decided to accompany Tom to work in the first place. He wishes that he were back at the manor, in the library, and he wishes that Azim were wrapped around his wrist, and most of all, he wishes that he could close his eyes and wake up in a world that made more sense.

“Okay,” he says. “Okay.” His shoulders slump. He holds the wand out to Tom on his palm. Tom takes it and quietly stows it within his robes.

“Thank you, Harry. I,” Tom hesitates. “I truly am sorry.”

Harry blinks at him and reaches up, absently rubbing at the burns on his cheek that are still stinging. “It’s fine. I understand.”

Tom catches Harry’s hand and pulls it away from his face. He weaves their fingers together. “It’s not fine,” he says.

Harry shrugs. “Can we just go home now?” he asks quietly.

Tom’s eyes widen infinitesimally. He seems extremely taken aback. “Home?”

Harry nods absently. “Back home, to the manor,” he says.

Tom’s cheeks colour. He stares at Harry and then pulls him in close, right to his chest, wrapping his arms all around him in a protective embrace.

“Please,” Harry mumbles against his shirt. “I’m tired.”

Tom withdraws a bit and then grimaces, looking even more grievous than before, and Harry’s heart falls. “You must see a healer first,” he explains.

“But, I’m fine,” Harry says. He stares down at their entwined hands. “It was nothing, I’m— I’m fine.”

“Harry,” Tom says gently. “You are not fine. You are injured. They must document your injuries, and heal you, and then we must give our statements to the aurors. And then we can,” Tom pauses, stumbling over his words a bit, like he can hardly believe what he is about to say, “we can go home after that, love. I promise.”

Harry flinches. “I don’t— I don’t want to talk to the aurors again.”

“Auror Brady was escorted off the premises an hour ago,” Tom says. “You will be perfectly safe, Harry. I will be with you.”

Harry shakes his head. “They won’t listen. They aren’t going to believe me. And *he* said I was mentally unhinged, and—”

“‘Mentally unhinged,’” Tom scoffs. He pulls Harry in closer once more. Harry goes willingly and presses his face into the crook of Tom’s neck. “Do not let what that man said plague your mind. He is not worth the energy.”

Harry doesn't respond. He understands what Tom is saying, but it's easier said than done.

"Take my wand," Hermione says suddenly.

Harry jerks his head up, startled. He had forgotten that anyone else was in the room. He flushes and stares at Hermione over Tom's shoulder with wide eyes. "What?"

She smiles at him, although she looks a bit teary-eyed. "You can borrow it," she says, and then extends her hand, wand resting on her open palm. Harry stares down at it in disbelief.

"Miss Granger," Tom interjects. "That is far out of the range of your responsibilities as my assistant. I cannot ask that you do this—"

"You are not asking," she says. "I am offering." She holds the wand out closer to Harry. "Go on then, Mr. Potter," she says.

"Harry," Harry says quietly.

"Right. Harry," Hermione corrects herself, seeming a bit sad. She smiles at him again. "You can borrow it until you get yours back."

Harry shifts himself carefully out of Tom's arms and walks back across the room to Hermione, who takes his hand and presses the wand into it. Harry curls his fingers around it and wonders if he is dreaming. He wonders if this is some kind of trick. He wonders if Hermione is going to snatch the wand away at any moment and her face will twist into a hateful sneer. He wonders if Tom will punish him for acquiring a wand immediately after giving Theo's up.

"I don't understand," he mumbles. "Why would you do this for me? I thought you— I thought you hated me."

Tom, from behind him, inhales sharply.

"How odd. I thought you hated *me,"* Hermione answers, amused.

Harry shakes his head earnestly. He sinks down on the couch beside her. "No. *No.* Of course not, Hermione, I— I could *never—"*

"Then it looks like we both made some faulty assumptions," she says primly. "And that's no good at all, is it? We'll have to do better from now on."

Harry nods. "Yeah. Okay. That's— yeah." His eyes start to fill with tears. He grits his teeth and tries to hold them back. But Hermione reaches out once more and squeezes his hand and in response Harry leans forward, throwing his arms around her and burying his face in her chest. He can feel the tears spill out, warm and salty, over his cheeks and soaking into her robes.

"Oh," Hermione says, her hands fluttering nervously around Harry. "Er— I'm so sorry, minister, I don't—"

“Do not apologize,” Tom says. He sounds a bit closer, like he has followed Harry across the room. Harry feels a firm hand rest between his shoulder blades and he shivers. “I cannot thank you enough for your actions this afternoon. You were there for my husband when he needed it.”

“Oh,” Hermione says again, a bit awkwardly. “Well, I was just, er. I happened to be in the right place at the right time, I suppose. It’s really nothing. I’m just glad Mr. Potter’s alright —”

“Harry,” Harry interjects, his voice muffled.

“Right… Harry,” Hermione says. “I’m glad Harry’s alright.”

Chapter End Notes

TWs:
-body horror & spiders (more of the same)
-threats of violence
-slut shaming, victim blaming
-drugs
-aftermath of sexual assault/attempted rape
-implied non-con voyeurism
-dissociation, shock

summary:

In the aftermath of Theo's assault, Hermione checks in on Harry and attempts to heal Theo. Harry is in shock and not able to tell her much of what happened. Tom arrives with a few aurors and questions Harry. One of the aurors is very openly aggressive toward Harry and makes accusations about Harry's sexual history and his past with Theo. He uses sexually explicit/derogatory language and claims to have seen Theo and Harry together and has been a witness to their liaisons.

Tom uses the spell *oscausi* on the auror to silence him, which causes Harry to dissociate. He comes to in Tom's office and speaks with Tom and Hermione about what happened and how he doesn't regret what he did to Theo.

All excerpts that Hermione reads are from *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith.

Chapter 16: 16

Chapter Notes

> This chapter sort of turned into a monster. I don't usually let them get this long. I also hope the switching between tenses isn't too jarring! Also apologies again for the delay! I appreciate all of the kind comments and feedback, I have not had the time to respond but I promise I will eventually. You guys are amazing and I'm loving all of the support. <3 thank you!!!
>
> This one is pretty light angst-wise, but as always TWs in endnote!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It only takes a moment for Bitsy to find Harry wandering the halls that night, after they've finished with all the healers and the aurors and have finally gone home. She pops into the hallway beside him the second he steps out of his bedroom, like she was waiting for him, and she wraps her hand around his elbow.

"What is Master Harry doing out of bed?" she asks gently. "Master Harry is needing his rest."

Harry flushes. "I can't sleep," he says.

-

Tom had carried Harry all the way from his office to the auror department, despite Harry's red-faced protests.

"What are you—I can walk!" Harry had complained the second he felt his feet leave the floor. His voice had cracked on the last word and he had dissolved into another coughing fit.

"You are injured," Tom had said, a bit exasperated.

“My legs are fine, though,” Harry had croaked, rubbing his neck. Tom had pushed his hand away. “It was really only a bit of light strangling.”

Hermione had made a muffled sound behind them, like she was trying not to laugh, and Tom’s gaze had darkened.

“A bit of light strangling,” he had repeated.

Harry had cringed. He had thought of the journal then, and other-Harry’s seemingly utter disregard for his well-being, and how horrified Tom must have felt. And Harry had felt a little bad, a little guilty but he had frowned at Tom and refused to back down. “I can walk,” he had repeated stubbornly.

Tom had ignored him. And Harry had been glad of the fact when, only a moment later, they had stepped out into the hall and were once more surrounded by aurors.

“Keep your distance,” Tom had said to them, his words cold and hard.

“Sir,” one of the aurors had said. It sounded like Auror Williams. “For your protection, it’s standard—”

“My husband was just verbally abused by a member of your team,” Tom had snapped. “Previously to that, he was abducted, assaulted, and very nearly raped *on Ministry property* where he should have been under your protection. Tell me, Williams, what your standards have to say about *that.”*

Harry had flinched. “It’s okay,” he had mumbled, feeling ashamed. He had felt his face going bright red where it was pressed against Tom’s cloak. “It wasn’t that bad. It’s not their fault.”

“It is most certainly *not* okay,” Tom had said quietly to Harry before raising his voice to address the aurors once more. “I have no use for a security team that cannot do their job. Harry no longer feels safe in your presence, and I am not entrusting his well being to another soul until the entire force has completed an inner investigation. Until then, keep your distance and keep your mouths shut, unless you’d like to follow Brady right out that door.”

“Yes sir, Minister, sir,” Auror Williams had said very somberly. All of the other aurors had gone utterly silent except for a nervous shuffling of robes.

And Harry had felt strangely pleased, although he had still been horribly embarrassed. It had felt good to have someone take such an invested interest in his safety. It had felt even better to see the kind of power and control that Tom could wield when he put his mind to it, and to know that he would willingly use that power for Harry’s benefit (and Harry didn’t even have to *ask*).

-

Bitsy purses her lips and stares worriedly at him in the dimly-lit hallway. She lets go of his elbow and instead twines their hands together. Azim, coiled around Harry's left wrist, flicks his tongue out to taste the air. "Master Harry did not finish his supper," Bitsy goes on. "He asked to be left alone, and then went to bed without tea or biscuits. Perhaps he is hungry now? Would Master Harry like a bite to eat? Or perhaps some hot cocoa? Or would he like another bath—"

"No, thank you," Harry interrupts her gently. He opens his mouth and then closes it. He casts his gaze around the hallway helplessly.

"Then what is Master Harry needing?"

"I need—" Harry hesitates. He bites his lip. He fiddles with the hem of his shirt. "I don't know."

-

The healer had been a nice woman with a heart-shaped face and reddish-blonde hair that reminded Harry enough of Molly Weasley that his heart had ached. She had tutted over him in the paper hospital gown, scowling at the photographers whenever they got too close or when the bright flash of the camera made Harry wince.

He didn't want them to take the pictures, but he had understood that it was necessary to document what had happened between him and Theo. (Harry had imagined these aurors taking the very same pictures of Theo in another room somewhere in St. Mungo's. He had wondered if they had figured out a way to counter the curse yet, or if there were still little spiders spilling out over the man's lips. ~~He had hoped for the latter.~~)

Tom had held his hand the whole time, even after the photographers had left and the healer had eyed Tom shrewdly and asked Harry if he would like to complete the rest of the appointment alone.

“No,” Harry had said quickly, his hand tightening in Tom’s. “He can stay. Please,” he had added, when the woman had narrowed her eyes.

“Alright dearie,” she had finally said, after giving Tom one final warning look. “Now let’s have a look, shall we?”

Harry had nodded, feeling rather agitated, and had clutched the hem of the hospital gown very tightly. “It’s, er…” he had stammered. “It’s nothing, really. Just my neck.”

“The burns are from a revulsion charm fired at close range,” Tom had interjected quietly and firmly. “And I’m sure you can see the bruising and irritation around his wrists and throat.”

“It’s fine,” Harry had mumbled, his face going hot.

“It’s not fine, Harry,” Tom had said. He had rubbed his thumb gently over the skin of Harry’s wrist. “This should not have happened, and for that I will be forever sorry. But I am with you, and I will not let him hurt you ever again. Do you understand?”

Harry had blinked dumbly at him and then nodded, shivering when the healer murmured something under her breath and the aching in his throat had suddenly eased. “Okay,” he had said, clearing his throat, his eyes stinging. “I understand.”

-

Bitsy lets out an impatient huff of breath. She glares at Harry with her hands on her hips. The apron over her waist has dark purple stains on it, like she was in the middle of mashing blueberries to be made into jam. “Master Harry must talk to Bitsy so she can help him!”

Why are we stalling? Azim hisses next. *Where is your mate's nest?*

I don’t actually know, Harry admits to the little snake. *I’ve never… well, it has been a… while. I’m nervous.*

You are nervous? Azim says, sounding amused. *The man worships you. He should be honored by the gift of your presence. You waste your time pining, and shivering, smelling of fear and sadness when you could be coiled up safe and warm with your mate, getting fed bits of fruit and meat like a spoiled hatchling.*

Shut up, Harry hisses.

Bitsy stares between Harry and Azim with wonder in her eyes. “Master Harry is using his special gift again!”

“It’s not a gift,” Harry mumbles, feeling uncomfortable, thinking of the way he truly acquired his Parseltongue.

Some nights he imagines the horcrux is still there in his head, a miniscule part of it having somehow survived the forest, a vestige of Voldemort still clinging to life inside Harry’s brain and spreading tiny threads of poison wherever it can reach.

(When he finds himself thinking this way, though, Harry has learned to immediately call for Bitsy and request a vial of Dreamless Sleep. There are some things he cannot allow himself to imagine, to consider fully, unless he wants to spend the rest of the night cold and numb, drifting, lost in the back of his mind, only coming to himself in the morning when sunlight drifts through the window and guides his thoughts into a safer place.)

“It is a most wondrous gift,” Bitsy chides Harry. “Bitsy is not understanding why Master Harry will not tell Master Riddle. He would be so very happy and pleased to know that—”

“Please, Bitsy,” Harry interrupts her, instantly panicking. They have had this particular argument countless times since that day in the pet shop with Ron. “Just—you promised you wouldn’t tell him,” he pleads. “You won’t, will you? Not until I’m ready?”

Bitsy pouts, and then nods. “Of course, Master Harry. Bitsy is not understanding, but she is keeping Master Harry’s secret.”

Harry sighs. “Thank you,” he says.

Are you finished talking? Azim says.

You didn’t have to come with me, Harry responds, feeling a bit annoyed.

And leave you vulnerable to another attack? I should think not. My master is a fool to leave you alone after such a thing. If it were my mate, I would not have strayed even a foot from—

I am not going to be attacked inside the manor, Harry hisses back, rolling his eyes. *We’re safe in here. The wards are strong. And I’m not vulnerable— I can protect myself.* He sticks his hand down into the pocket of his dressing gown, making sure that Hermione’s wand is still there.

If you truly believed you were safe, we would not even be having this discussion. You would be asleep in your own bed, like always, and you would not be seeking the comfort of your mate’s nest.

Shut up, Harry repeats, scowling down at the snake.

Bitsy looks between them again, rocking back on her heels, seeming envious. “What is Master Harry saying to his snake friend? Is he wishing to return to his chambers now?”

“No,” Harry says. “I… I don’t want to go back to my room.”

“Master Harry must tell me what he needs,” Bitsy says, pursing her lips, “or else… he is getting put to work in the kitchen. There are blueberries to be mashed, and dough to knead, and vegetables to be chopped, and—”

“Okay!” Harry interrupts, flushing again. He ignores Bitsy’s amused look. “Can you just—” he pauses and finally swallows his pride. “Look. Could you please—well, er. Do you think Tom is still awake? Do you think he would mind if—?”

The house-elf’s eyes light up in instant delight and Harry cringes.

“Of course!” Bitsy says, like she has been waiting centuries for him to ask. She grabs his hand and tugs him down the corridor so fast that he nearly loses his footing.

“Oh, god. Hang on a second, it’s not—” Harry can see exactly what she’s thinking and he wants to stop that train of thought before it gets out of hand. “It’s not like that, Bitsy, don’t make it—weird,” Harry pleads.

“There is nothing to be ‘making weird.’ It is the most natural thing in the word,” Bitsy says, her eyes gleaming proudly. “Master Harry is having a bad day, and is needing his husband. Bitsy is taking him to Master Riddle’s chambers so that he can be happy and sleep snuggled up tight and not think about sad things anymore.”

Harry sighs.

You should scold him some more, when we arrive, Azim hisses quietly to him as they walk. *That was amusing.*

No, it wasn’t, Harry says through gritted teeth.

He deserved it.

No, he didn’t.

Harry thinks that if snakes could roll their eyes, Azim would do it in a heartbeat. Instead, the snake flicks its tongue out again and squeezes around Harry’s wrist. *Yes, he did. My master is, for someone professed to be one of the most powerful wizards in the world, rather stupid. He believes that because you are his husband, that he knows you. But he only sees what he wants to see. He is blind to what you have become. Who you truly are.*

Who I truly—Azim, I told you, I’m the same person I always have been, Harry retorts, feeling a bit unsettled. *And—I don’t want to talk about it now, anyway. He might hear us. Don’t forget to—*

Yes, Azim hisses. *I will keep your ridiculous secret. Do not fret.*

-

They had sat in the interrogation room for a few minutes alone while Harry prepared himself. Tom had sat close to Harry, an arm around his shoulders, and had walked him through the standard checklist of questions the auror would likely ask.

“A few minutes, that’s all,” Tom had murmured to Harry very quietly. “Only a few questions. And then we will go home.”

Harry had clenched his jaw and nodded. His hand was still in his pocket, wrapped around Hermione’s wand, and the feel of it was keeping his heart rate at an acceptable level.

And then the door to the room had opened, and a tall, gangly auror with a familiar head of red hair stumbled into the room. He had surveyed the room and then grinned at Harry. Harry had sunk back in his chair, his grip on the wand going slack, instantly relieved. He had grinned happily back at the sight of his other best friend.

“Hiya, Harry!” Ron had said, and then his face had immediately paled, freckles standing out in sharp relief, and he had darted his eyes toward Tom. “Er, sorry, Minister, sir. I’m, ah—” he had scrubbed a nervous hand through his hair and cleared his throat, pulling a sheaf of papers from within his red auror robes and squinting at them. “I’m here to take your statements on the incident from this afternoon, Mr. Riddle and Mr. Potter.”

“And you are?” Tom had asked coolly, shifting closer to Harry.

Ron’s face had paled even further. “Oh, right. Er— Ron, I mean— Auror Weasley, sir. At your service.”

“I don’t recognize you.”

Ron had grinned sheepishly, then, ducking his head. “Right, yeah. Well, see… I’m new. Normally they wouldn’t let me conduct these interviews but, ah—” he had scratched at his head and shrugged. “Nobody else seemed to want to do this one. Bit odd, that…”

“I see,” Tom had said.

Ron’s grin had faltered. “I can request another officer, though, if you’d like, sir,” he had said, half-standing out of his chair.

“No,” Harry had blurted out and Ron had froze, looking uncertainly between Harry and Tom.

Tom’s brow had furrowed and he had leaned in, murmuring quietly in Harry’s ear. “It’s alright, love,” he had said. “You deserve more than a junior auror. It’s unprofessional. I’ll have them send for—”

“No, it’s alright, really,” Harry had said, his eyes wide and pleading on Tom’s. “It’s—he’s my, er— my friend,” he had finished lamely.

“Your friend,” Tom had repeated. He had turned an indecipherable gaze on Ron, who had squared his shoulders and smiled, although there was sheer panic painted all over his face.

“He went shopping with me and Bitsy,” Harry had blurted out, although that hadn’t seemed to remedy the situation at all. Tom’s eyes had only narrowed.

“Right… we were short a man that day,” Ron had explained, grimacing. “I, ah. I filled in for a few hours. They said you were notified, sir. I’m sorry for any misunderstanding. I did my best to keep your husband safe, sir, of course, and—” Ron had hesitated. “We had… ice cream?”

“Ice cream.” Tom’s tone had been rife with disbelief.

Harry had looked up between Ron and Tom and he felt his body filling with tension again. His smile had faded. “I’m sorry,” he had said.

Tom’s accusatory gaze had jerked toward Harry and his face had instantly softened. “Why are you apologizing?” he had asked quietly.

Harry had shrugged, feeling uneasy.

Tom had glanced at Ron again, and back at Harry, and then he seemed to understand, and his expression had turned a bit abashed. He had leaned in close to Harry, brushing a very soft kiss over his cheek and then had leaned across the metal table, extending his hand to Ron.

“My apologies, Mr. Weasley,” Tom had said formally. “It is, of course, an absolute pleasure to make the acquaintance of one of my husband’s dear friends. I apologize for my lack of decorum.”

Ron had lurched forward and latched excitedly onto Tom’s hand, shaking it. “No, yeah, of course, pleasure to meet you too, Minister,” he had said, blushing furiously. And then, after the handshake was over, Ron had sank back in his seat and smiled broadly at both of them, seeming quite pleased.

Tom had cleared his throat expectantly, looking at the sheaf of papers on the table between them.

“Oh!” Ron had sat straight up, his spine going ramrod, and had stammered out a rushed apology. “Of course, the statements. Er—” he had stared down at the rumpled papers. “I’m to conduct interviews with Mr. Potter, Minister Riddle, and—” Ron had paused and squinted. “Miss… Granger? Her-me-own Granger?”

“Hermione,” Harry had said, biting back an amused grin.

Ron had looked around the room and scratched his head. “So where is she?”

“Waiting in the hall,” Tom had said. His fingers had drummed on the metal table. “Can we get on with it? I’d like to take my husband home. He’s had a very long day.”

“Right, right, of course,” Ron had said quickly, reddening again. He had glanced between Tom and Harry. “Well, er. Who’d like to go first?”

“I will,” Harry had said immediately. He had wanted to get it over with. Tom, beside him, had leaned closer, offering a comforting presence in the room that was beginning to feel colder and colder, even with Ron there with them.

“Alright,” Ron had said. His eyes had gone a bit soft, and he had smiled at Harry. “It’s okay, mate. Just a few standard questions. Nothing out of the norm. And you don’t have to answer anything that you don’t want to. Yeah?”

Harry had nodded. “Yeah,” he had said, feeling relieved.

“Okay.” Ron had smiled again and then glanced at Tom. “Minister Riddle, sir— would you like to wait outside while we conduct Harry’s— I mean, Mr. Potter’s interview—”

“I am not going *anywhere,”* Tom had said, his voice low and threatening. He had squeezed Harry’s hand very tightly.

“Can’t he stay?” Harry had added shakily. “I just don’t want… I can’t—”

“Oh, yeah,” Ron had said hastily. “I didn’t mean to imply that— it’s just that usually we—I mean, yeah, that’s alright. If that’s what you want, Mr. Potter. If that will make you more comfortable.”

Harry had nodded rapidly. He had shuffled his chair closer to Tom’s until their arms were pressed together. “Yes, please,” he had said quietly.

Ron had cleared his throat and picked up the papers, rifling through them and then pulling out a self-writing quill. He had looked across the table to Harry, then, and his expression had grown quite serious. He had looked like he was trying very hard to make the interview as professional as possible. He had puffed his chest out a bit, and adjusted his robes, letting his hands rest on the table between them.

“Alright then, Mr. Potter,” he had said.

“Harry. Please,” Harry had corrected him that time, glancing nervously at Tom, who had only looked encouragingly back at him.

“Harry,” Ron had repeated. “Right. Now—” he had looked at Harry very gently. “Why don’t you start from the beginning, and tell me what happened?”

-

Bitsy keeps tugging Harry on through the darkened manor. Harry's socked feet move near-silently on the wood floors. He thinks faintly that he should have put on his slippers. He hadn't realised how far Tom's chambers were from his own. Azim has fallen silent, having traveled from Harry's wrist up his arm and is now coiled very loosely around his throat.

Harry thinks that it should probably feel suffocating, but it is actually a sort of comforting feeling. The snake is heavy and cool on his skin, like actual silver, and it makes him feel less alone. He keeps reaching up absently, petting at the scales, but Azim doesn't seem to mind.

"Can't you just snap your fingers and apparate us there?" Harry mumbles, exasperated when they turn down another hall with no end in sight.

"Master Harry is visiting his husband's rooms for the very first time," Bitsy says, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "Master Harry must learn the way, so that he is not getting lost anymore, and so he can be visiting Master Riddle's rooms whenever he pleases."

"The first time?" Harry repeats. A feeling of horror dawns over him. He pauses, tries to dig his heels in, to turn around, but Bitsy won't let him. She keeps pulling him forward.

"Wait, Bitsy it's—it's alright, really, I can manage, I don't want to bother him, especially after everything I—"

Bitsy snorts. "Master Harry must not worry about that. He is Master Riddle's husband, and he can bother him whenever he wishes."

Harry's face pales. "I don't think that's true, Bitsy—"

They come to a stop in front of an unassuming door. Bitsy reaches out and raps smartly on the wood with her knuckles, turns and grins mischievously at Harry, and then disappears.

-

Harry had fixed his eyes very carefully on the metal table in the interrogation room as he spoke. "I was spending the day with Tom," he had started slowly. "I got bored of sitting in his

office, so… I decided I'd walk down to the canteen for lunch and do a bit of exploring."

"Alone?" Ron had prompted Harry.

Harry had shifted and glanced at Tom and then at Ron. "No," he had said. "I took Auror Williams with me."

"Right," Ron had said, nodding his head at the quill, which had twitched and then began scribbling furiously on the notepad.

It had made Harry feel nervous. He had stared at the paper, trying to read the upside-down writing. He had thought about fourth year—which felt like eons ago, now, and worlds away—and the interview with Rita Skeeter in the broom closet, when she had pressed uncomfortably close to him and had stroked his cheek, cooing at him like he was a helpless child, while her quill had made up a bunch of lies and slander that were nowhere near the truth.

Ron had tracked his gaze and made a hum of understanding. "It only writes down direct quotes," he had explained. "Just things that you've expressly stated in the interview. Is that alright, mate?"

The furrow in Harry's brow had eased, and he had smiled gratefully. "Yeah, that's alright," he had said.

"So. You were exploring…?" Ron had said.

Harry had nodded with a wince. "Yeah, er. I sort of walked all over the place. I don't really remember my exact route."

"That's alright," Ron had said, while the quill continued to scratch words onto the parchment. "Completely understandable. What happened next?"

Harry had stared down at his lap, then, at his hand which was curled up in Tom's tight grip. "Everything went dark," he had said. "I couldn't see. I heard a loud cracking sound. And then—I felt someone grab my arm. We disapparated."

"Who grabbed your arm, Harry?" Ron had asked, his eyes soft and blue, trained on Harry.

"It was Theo," Harry had said. "Theodore Nott."

-

Harry gapes at the empty space in the hallway that Bitsy's body had occupied only moments ago. "Bitsy," he hisses, furious. He knows she can still hear him. "Come back here. You can't just—"

Calm down, Azim says. *Take a breath. Your pulse is racing.*

The door knob jostles, and then the door swings inward to reveal Tom. He opens the door wider and stares at Harry. He doesn't look like he's been sleeping at all. His hair is rumpled like he's been running his fingers through it, and there are dark bags beneath his eyes. He's still half-dressed, in his work trousers and with his chest bare.

"Harry?" he says.

Harry hovers in the doorway and blinks at his husband. His mouth suddenly feels dry. "I… I'm sorry. I know I said—that I wanted to be alone. But I just…" he hesitates.

Your mate is in distress, Azim hisses to Tom when Harry fails to finish his sentence. *Are you going to invite him in?*

"I'd hoped you'd be long asleep by now, darling. Are you alright?" Tom asks, ignoring the snake. He steps forward and wraps his arm around Harry's waist, tugging him into the room. The door swings shut behind them.

"I'm fine," Harry says.

-

"I'm fine," Harry had said, when everything was said and done and they were finally home. Tom had walked him all the way to his room and stared at him all the while with dark, worried eyes.

Harry had stared back, feeling numb.

"Are you feeling any lingering pain or discomfort?" Tom had asked.

"No," Harry had said, reaching up a hand to prod at his newly-healed neck until Tom had grabbed his hand, linking their fingers together.

“Good,” Tom had hummed then, watching Harry like he was a bomb just waiting to go off. “Would you like to lie down? Or—”

“No,” Harry had interrupted, jerking his hand out of Tom’s grip and then froze, wincing. “Sorry, no. I just—I need—”

He had tried to explain what he was feeling, like his skin was crawling, like Theo’s hands were still all over him, squeezing and pinching and groping, but he couldn’t get the words to come out. He had, instead, gestured helplessly in the general direction of himself.

Tom’s eyes had shifted down to Harry’s still-torn shirt, and the loose button on his trousers, and a muscle in his jaw had twitched. His hands had flexed and he had taken a small step toward Harry. “If you need assistance, I am happy to, ah—” he had hesitated. “That is, would you like me to—?”

Harry had flinched again without really meaning to, taking a quick step away from Tom and nearly stumbling. “No. No, I, I don’t— I don’t want—I’m sorry.”

Tom had instantly raised his hands in surrender, palms open and facing out, and had taken his own step back as well to give Harry space, although it looked like it was costing everything in him to do so.

“Bitsy,” he had said then. The house elf had popped into the room, a dish towel slung over her shoulder and her hands covered in soapy bubbles.

“Master Riddle and Master Harry have returned early from the Ministry,” she had said, sounding a bit curious.

“Yes,” Tom had said.

“Would Master Riddle like me to prepare dinner?” Bitsy had asked. But—she had turned toward Harry as she spoke, taking in his appearance, and her eyes had widened.

“Bitsy,” Tom had said, before she could say anything else. “Harry has had an extremely difficult day. Will you help him out of his clothing and draw a bath?” Tom had paused. “And perhaps a light dinner, afterward? And some tea?”

Bitsy had squared her shoulders and nodded avidly, reaching out and wrapping her hand around Harry’s.

“I’m not hungry,” Harry had said.

“I know,” Tom had responded. He had stepped carefully close just for a moment, just to rest his palm on Harry’s cheek and brush his lips over the top of Harry’s head. “You’ll try and eat something anyway. Won’t you, darling?”

“Okay,” Harry had mumbled obediently, blinking rapidly, his cheeks suddenly feeling hot. “But are you—” he had resisted a bit, when Bitsy tried to tug him toward the bathroom, and she had let out a tiny huff of annoyed breath. “You’re leaving now?”

“Would you like me to stay?” Tom had countered.

Harry had gaped at him in sudden alarm. “I… I don’t know.”

“Go with Bitsy,” Tom had said, his eyes soft. “You’ll feel better after a warm bath. And when you’ve finished, I will be here. Until the very moment you send me away I will be at your side. Do you understand?”

“Oh,” Harry had said. He had felt something in his chest loosen, and some of his fear and discomfort had faded. “Okay.”

-

Tom grips Harry by the shoulders now, in the soft light of his room, and looks him over. “Are you feeling alright?”

“I’m fine,” Harry says again. His eyes drop from Tom’s face to his bare collar bones, to the hard panes of his chest, and the dark patch of hair that starts at Tom’s belly and delves beneath his trousers. Harry swallows hard and forces his gaze back up.

Tom looks wide awake, now. His eyes are dark on Harry. He licks his lips and pulls Harry even closer. One hand slips beneath his shirt and rests on the bare skin of his lower back. “What do you need from me, husband?”

Harry shivers. “I don’t know,” he says, and then, “I’m sorry,” and then—“I just can’t sleep.”

“Come here,” Tom says gently. He tugs Harry over to the bed.

Harry looks around the room in a bit of a daze. It’s bigger than his own rooms, although not by much. There’s a large window on the south side, slid open just an inch or two, and there is the scent of cool, fresh air making goosebumps rise on Harry’s skin. And other than a wardrobe of clothing, and a small chest that must be filled with blankets or sweaters, the room is— practically empty. Devoid of personality. Sort of like the drab motel room that Uncle Vernon had dragged them to all those years ago in his quest to keep Harry away from his Hogwarts letter.

He spots a small book on the side table though, open to the middle and looking well-loved. The pages are smudged with dark ink and heavily dog-eared.

Tom pulls up one side of the bed sheets and guides Harry forward, but Harry freezes. He stops with one knee up on the mattress and twists to look at his husband with sudden apprehension. Tom waits for him to speak. His eyes are soft, his hand a calming weight on Harry's back.

"I don't, er…" Harry pales. He reaches up to his throat and wraps his hand around Azim. He rubs his thumb along the cool scales and takes in a shuddery breath. "I'm sorry. I don't want…"

"I know," Tom says quietly. "It's alright, Harry. Just lie down."

Harry nods and climbs all the way onto the bed, sinking into the mattress and curling up under the sheets. He squeezes his eyes shut and listens as Tom pads around to the other side of the bed.

Azim moves, slithering across Harry's collarbone and shoulder, down his arm to once more coil around his wrist. Then there is the sound of fabric shifting, and the clink of a belt unbuckling, which makes the hair on Harry's arms raise and his teeth clench. But Tom only sighs quietly and steps out of his trousers. He crosses the room, and Harry hears the wardrobe creak open for a moment and then shut. Tom crosses back over to the bed and Harry braces himself.

(What he is bracing himself for, he does not know.)

The blankets shift, the mattress dips, and then an arm wraps around Harry's stomach, pulling him firmly back until he's pressed right up to Tom's chest. Tom sighs again, like a great weight has just been lifted off his shoulders, and his breath heats the back of Harry's neck, making him shiver.

"Are you cold?" Tom asks.

"... a bit," Harry says, ~~only so that Tom will pull him closer.~~

-

Harry had still felt terribly cold, even after soaking in the warm water of the bath for close to an hour. And although Bitsy had sang to him very sweetly and ran her fingers through his curls repeatedly, he still hadn't been able to fully relax or stop shivering. She had tried to talk

to him, to coax him into speaking, to try and gain some understanding of what had happened, but Harry hadn't been able to respond.

Even when she had finally thought to summon Azim, snapping her fingers and pressing the little snake to Harry's skin until it woke, coming alive with a hiss and coiling up on Harry's palm, Harry hadn't reacted. He hadn't quite been able to process any of the snake's questions. So eventually she had just helped him up out of the water, wrapped him in the softest bathrobe she could find, and had tugged him back into the bedroom.

Tom had still been there, waiting just like he said he would, and Harry hadn't been sure why that surprised him so much. Tom had looked up when Harry emerged from the bathroom and had crossed the room quickly, one arm going around Harry's waist when he had stumbled. "I have you," he had murmured.

"Sorry," Harry had said, allowing himself to be guided over to the bed, his teeth chattering.

"Master Riddle, Master Harry is—he is being ill, or—something is being *very* wrong—"

"Yes, I am aware, Bitsy," Tom had said. "Thank you—will you please send up a tray now for Harry?"

"M'not hungry—"

"I know," Tom had interrupted gently. "Don't worry about that, love. Just—come here, and —" he had sat Harry down on the edge of the mattress and pressed an ice cold glass of water into his hands. Harry had stared down into it, feeling confused.

"Drink, please," Tom had said.

Harry had raised the glass obediently to his lips.

He is unwell, Azim had hissed to Tom from where he was coiled around Harry's forearm. *What has happened?*

He was attacked, Tom had responded. *His injuries have been fully healed. He needs rest.*

He was attacked while in your care? Azim had said.

Yes.

By whom?

The man has been dealt with.

Not soon enough, Azim had retorted, sounding cool. *You allowed him to harm your mate. This is unacceptable.*

"Drink a bit more if you can, Harry," Tom had said, when Harry paused and lowered the glass down to his lap. Tom hadn't mentioned his side conversation with the snake, although

when Harry looked up, he had seen that his husband's face had gone white and his jaw was clenched very tightly. Harry had averted his eyes and brought the glass to his lips again.

I know it is unacceptable, Tom had hissed quietly. *We are lucky that Harry is strong. He defended himself admirably.*

He should not have had to, Azim had immediately countered.

I know.

Harry had begun to feel uncomfortable. He had drained the rest of the water and then handed it back to Tom, still averting his eyes and hoping that his understanding of Parseltongue wasn't painted obviously across his face.

"Good," Tom had said, vanishing the empty glass. "Thank you, Harry."

The small praise had felt like too much.

Harry hadn't felt like he deserved to be spoken to gently. He had nearly killed a man. He had caused yet another scandal, one that would likely make Tom's life harder. And he had no idea what James and Lily were going to do to him when they found out. And so Harry's eyes had welled up with tears. Tom had shifted closer and caught one stray tear on the pad of his thumb, cradling Harry's cheek in his palm.

"I don't understand," Harry had said.

"You've had a long day, love. I'm sure you're feeling overwhelmed."

"Aren't you—aren't you—" Harry had stammered. "Why aren't you angry with me?"

"Angry?" Tom had repeated. "Why on earth would I be angry?"

"Why *wouldn't* you be?"

Tom had gaped at Harry for a moment, taken aback, and then his brow had furrowed. "I am not angry with you, Harry." He had tried to take Harry's hand, but Harry had shifted out of reach. Azim had traveled up his arm then, slithering around his bicep and then curling around his throat.

"Why not?" Harry had said. "You should be."

"No, Harry—" Tom had reached out towards Harry again, but Azim had hissed, rearing up threateningly.

I am only trying to—

"I embarrassed you," Harry had interrupted, feeling frustrated and not wanting to eavesdrop on more Parseltongue. "I caused a scandal. I stole someone's wand and almost killed them with it."

Tom's eyes had darkened. "I would not care even if you *had* killed him. None of that matters, Harry."

"You cared before," Harry had said, his eyes feeling hot. "When he—at the ministry party, when you found us, and—"

Tom had grimaced. "I know, Harry. I should never have—"

"And—I promised I wouldn't let it happen again, but… I did," Harry had said. His throat was beginning to ache. "He got me alone, and he touched me, and even though I said no, he wouldn't stop. He even unbuttoned my trousers, and I couldn't—"

"That is not your fault," Tom had said sharply. "Any of it." He had made to reach for Harry's hand again, but instead had made a sort of aborted movement and then grabbed one of the blankets instead, tugging it over Harry's lap while Azim had continued to hiss threateningly.

"Of course it is," Harry had pressed, swiping furiously at his tear-stained cheeks and then reaching down to clutch at the blanket. "I should have known better. I shouldn't have left your office. I shouldn't have stepped away from Auror Williams. Do you think my parents will care whether I wanted it? Whether I said yes or no? They'll only care about the fallout. The 'consequences of my actions' and the 'effect on our family name.'"

"Do not worry about your parents," Tom had said. "They will understand. I will not allow them to berate you for merely defending yourself from an abuser."

Harry had stared at his husband. "You think… they'll understand?" he had repeated, suddenly feeling numb again. He had wrapped his hands tighter around the blanket bunched on his lap, feeling at the soft fabric, trying to stay present and not float away.

"They will have to. I'll explain to them what happened," Tom had said. "Whatever scandal comes of this, it does not matter. All that matters to me is that you are safe and healed and home. And I'm certain your parents would agree."

Harry had found himself entirely unable to respond. His gaze had flattened, his eyes going blank and he had shuffled further back onto his bed, climbing fully beneath the blankets.

Bitsy had popped back into the room then with a large tray of finger foods in her hands. "Chamomile tea, and cheese and crackers for Master Harry," she had said, gliding across the room and setting the tray on the side table. She had pushed it a bit closer to Harry.

"I'm not—thank you, Bitsy," he had forced out, trying to sound normal and not like his world was caving in around him. "But I don't want—"

"You haven't eaten since this morning," Tom had interjected. "Please, Harry. Just something small—"

"I'm not hungry—"

"A stomach-settling potion first, maybe? Or a calming draught? Or—"

“I’m not fucking hungry!” Harry had said, frustrated. He had drawn his knees up to his chest and scowled at Bitsy and Tom, his chest rising and falling rapidly. Azim had gone very still around his throat. “You’re *not listening to me.* I said *no.* I don’t need any food, or drugs, or potions, or tea. I don’t need you, and I didn’t need—I didn’t want to be—I’m tired of everyone just assuming what I—I’m *fine.* I said no. I said *no,* okay? Do you understand?” his voice had cracked on the last word but he had continued glaring resolutely between the two of them.

The room had filled with an uncomfortable silence.

“Bitsy is *not* understanding,” the house elf had finally muttered. “Bitsy thinks that Master Harry is still too thin to be skipping meals. Bitsy wants Master Harry to be happy and healthy and to tell her what is happening at the ministry to make him sad and scared and quiet, just like he was being before he decided to throw himself from the top of the—”

“Bitsy, that’s enough,” Tom had started, sounding pained.

“I’m not—I’m not scared,” Harry had forced out, shaking his head. “I’m fine. I… I made you a promise, Bitsy.”

“Cushioning charm?” she had asked him suspiciously.

“No,” he had said, and then had laughed, albeit a bit shakily. “Not necessary, thank you. I just… I’m tired.”

Tom had stood and reached into his robes, pulling out an assortment of potion vials and setting them on Harry’s bedside table. “If you need them,” he had said quietly at Harry’s scowl.

“I won’t need them,” Harry had said sullenly, folding his arms over his chest.

“What do you need, then?” Tom had countered.

“I don’t know. I don’t— I don’t know. I think I just need to be alone for a bit,” Harry had said. “Please.”

“Master Harry should not be all alone. Not until he is eating something and feeling better,” Bitsy had said, seeming frustrated, and she had frowned at Harry, but Tom had rested a restraining hand on her shoulder.

“It’s alright, Bitsy,” he had said. “Harry can take care of himself, and he has Azim to keep him company. If he says he needs space, that’s what we will give him. And I’m sure he’ll tell you all about what happened later, when he’s feeling up to it.” He had leaned down and murmured something in her ear then, too quiet for Harry to hear, and Bitsy’s sharp gaze had softened.

“Yes, of course Master Riddle, Bitsy is always doing that,” she had said, and then popped out of the room without another word.

Tom had opened up the blanket chest in Harry's room then, pulling out a stack of extra warm blankets and sheets and had set them on the edge of Harry's bed.

"I'm sorry," Harry had said quietly, his eyes stinging, feeling terrible and not understanding why.

(The problem was that he *hadn't* wanted to be alone, not really, but he was tired of all of the talking, and the coddling, and the questions, and he had been feeling overwhelmed by the gentle way that Tom had been handling him since it all happened. It hadn't felt right. It hadn't felt like what Harry deserved.)

"Harry," Tom had sighed, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment. "Please do not apologize. I am the one who, time and again, has overstepped my bounds with you. I will," he had hesitated for a long moment, "I will retire to my chambers for the evening, if that's what you wish. Should you have need of anything, please promise me you will call for Bitsy."

"I will," Harry had said. "I will, Tom. I'm sorry— I mean, er. Thank you."

Tom had smiled softly at him. He had leaned over the bed very slowly, so that Harry had time to refuse, but Harry only leaned forward in kind, allowing Tom to pull him into a gentle embrace.

"I'm glad you are alright," Tom had murmured. "You are safe, and home, and that is what matters."

Harry had made a noncommittal noise in response, his chest feeling tight and his throat aching again. And when Tom had finally withdrawn, when he had let go of Harry and stood up, putting space between them, Harry had very nearly begged for him to stay. He had instead clutched at the sheets with shaky hands and let out a careful exhale of breath. "Goodnight," he had said, and then, "Thank you, Tom."

"Goodnight," Tom had said.

And so Harry had gotten his way. He had been left fully alone, with no one but Azim for company, and he had finally been given a moment to catch his breath since what happened at the ministry with Theo. He had crawled fully underneath his blankets, tucking himself into a ball in the bed, and had squeezed his eyes shut. He had waited for his heart to stop racing. He had waited for the uneasy feeling in his heart to fade. And he had waited for his bone-deep exhaustion to allow him to cross over into the dreamworld.

But none of that had happened.

Harry had tossed and turned for an hour or two, tangling the sheets and making his hair stick up, and although he had delved into the stack of blankets and tried to weigh himself down with the soft fabrics, he had still felt terribly unmoored.

Will you tell me what happened? Azim had asked after a while.

Harry had paused in his restless shuffling. *Nothing, really,* he had hissed.

Nothing, Azim had repeated.

Well. There was a man who used to be my… friend, Harry had reluctantly explained. *We were mates, of a sort. I told him I didn't want to see or speak to him anymore. He tried to… he, er. He attempted to—*

Azim had been perfectly silent while Harry nervously searched for the right words in Parseltongue.

He wanted to mate, Harry had said, wincing. *He would not take no for an answer.*

He hurt you, Azim had said.

Yes, Harry had answered, after a bit of hesitation.

Did you make him regret it?

I made him vomit spiders, Harry had said. *He nearly died.*

Pity that he did not.

Harry had snorted. *I am lucky he didn't. I could have gone to prison.*

You believe your mate would allow you to be punished for such an act? Do you underestimate the reach of his power?

Harry had reached up and ran one finger along Azim's scales. *I don't know,* he had responded honestly. *For a time, I wasn't sure if he cared about me at all. He has caught us together before, me and that man, in compromising positions, and has been very angry. He doesn't always listen. Sometimes he assumes the worst. His power and influence do nothing for me, if he does not care to use them.*

Azim had made an indignant hissing sound.

He listened this time, though, Harry had added hastily. *He did. He said that he trusted me.*

The bare minimum, Azim had said. *Enchanting.*

It's more than I deserve, Harry had retorted. *The things I've put him through, my reckless behavior, all the scandals and lying and cheating… he should have put me out on the streets ages ago.*

But that was not you, Azim had said, matter-of-fact, and Harry had froze.

Yes it was, he had said slowly.

No, it was not, Azim had said, sounding a bit smug.

Azim…

I may be small, and made of silver instead of flesh and blood, and the other snakes may shun me for my very existence, but I am not unintelligent, Azim had said. *You are not the man who wore me on the night of his wedding. You are not the Harry who feared the chill of my scales and who could not look me in the eye. You… you are something else entirely.*

I… don't know what you mean, Harry had responded, his mouth feeling very dry, and his jaw clenching.

I think you do. But, Azim had paused, suddenly sounding a bit regretful, *that is alright. We need not discuss it now. I have gotten ahead of myself. I have introduced further distress where you did not need it.*

I don't know what you mean, Harry had repeated stubbornly, shoving down the fear roiling in his stomach.

Azim was just a snake. He wasn't even a *real* snake. How could he have figured out something that Tom himself had yet to realise? And— how could Harry trust that the snake wouldn't say something to Tom? And if Azim thought Harry was an imposter, why hadn't he said something sooner? And why had he stayed by Harry's side all these weeks, loyal and true, offering kind words and comfort and professing to be Harry's guardian?

Breathe, Azim had said, after Harry had been stewing silently in his thoughts for a long time. *You do not need to fear me.*

I'm not afraid, Harry had said, stubborn. *I'm just—I am Harry. I am. You're just confused. You can't—*

I know you are Harry, Azim had said. *That is for certain. But that does not mean that I am wrong.*

Well, you are.

Azim had fallen silent for a while. Harry, for his part, had continued to toss and turn, feeling even more discomfited than before. His mind had flashed between the events at the ministry, to that day when his father had whipped him, to the night of the party, and the cruel words the auror had said.

Are you going to sleep? Azim had finally asked.

I don't think so, Harry had sighed. *I'm sorry. Do you want me to put you up? You can look out the window for a moment and then rest.*

It is you that needs rest, Azim had said.

I'm trying, Harry had said.

Go to your mate, Azim had said. *You should not be alone now.*

Harry had rolled his eyes. *Not you, too. Stop telling me what to—*

You may ignore the pleas of your mate, and your elf, but you may not ignore me, Azim had interrupted him grandly. *I am your guardian, and when I instruct you to do something you will do it, because you know that I am highly intelligent and you are in desperate need of my guidance.*

Highly intelligent? Harry had snorted, his annoyance already forgotten.

Yes, Azim had said. *Your mate is an utter buffoon who does not deserve you on the best of days. But he cares for you, and you care for him, and you should not be alone. You should allow him to comfort you.*

Harry had half-sat up in his bed, scrubbing at his face and frowning. *But I was rude. I made him go away. You hissed at him, too.*

Yes, because you did not need him then. But you need him now.

He'll want me to eat something. He'll try to—

Tell him you are tired, and then climb into his nest, Azim had suggested. *That will shut him up.*

-

They lie like that, in silence for a while, wrapped up in Tom's bed with nothing but the soft blowing of wind and the shuffling of leaves through the open window, the sounds of Tom's quiet breaths, and Harry's own heart thudding in his chest. And—the longer they lie there, with Harry curled up, tucked into his husband's chest, the more his racing pulse calms, and the itchiness in his skin begins to fade. His breaths come easier, and slower, and he relaxes bit by bit, until he feels himself finally slipping out of the waking world.

Tom seems to sense it. He drags his fingers carefully through Harry's curls and hums something, softly, under his breath. It sounds like a nursery rhyme, although not one that Harry is familiar with.

(There are, honestly, not many nursery rhymes he's familiar with.)

"M'sorry," he mumbles, and Tom pauses briefly in his ministrations before continuing.

"None of that," he says. "Rest now, Harry."

“Safe—” Harry starts, his words slurring a bit. He shivers. “Safe here?”

Tom pulls Harry impossibly closer. Their legs tangle together, and their breaths sync, and Tom drags his lips very gently along the line of Harry’s neck.

“Yes,” he breathes. “We are safe here. Always. I have you, Harry.”

Harry exhales heavily. The last of his remaining tension oozes out of his frame. And a while later, when Harry is finally on the edge of sleep, Azim shifts. He travels back up Harry’s arm again until his head is peeking out of the blanket. Harry shivers.

He begins to trust you, Azim hisses to Tom. *He allowed himself to seek you for comfort tonight, despite his misgivings. Will you take advantage? Will you push where he is not ready?*

No, Tom responds very quietly, still tracing his fingers through Harry’s curls. *I have caused him enough pain.*

And what will you do to this man who attacked your mate?

He will suffer, Tom says. *I will learn the extent of what he has done to my love, and I will make him pay for each and every hurt.*

And then you will kill him?

Tom is silent for a long time. Harry makes a soft snuffling sound, shifting around a bit, and Tom’s arms go tight, and he presses his lips to the nape of Harry’s neck. Harry sighs and goes still.

Death would be a mercy he has yet to earn, Tom finally says.

Harry doesn’t remember anything past that. He falls asleep feeling warm, and held, and watched over. He sleeps knowing that when he wakes, no matter what comes, Tom will be by his side.

Chapter End Notes

TWs:
light references to/discussion of sexual assault and attempted rape of the previous chapter, some self-blaming on Harry's part, references to body horror (spiders)

also here's a fun anecdote: when I wrote Harry saying "you're not listening to me!" in this chapter, I kept thinking of that scene in Coraline where she tells Wybie he's not listening and he says "that's. because. you're. CRAZY!"

Chapter 17: 17

Chapter Summary

Azim: are you going to respect Harry's boundaries?

Tom: yes, of course

Tom:

Tom: I am just going to seduce him a *liiiittle bit :)*

Azim:

Chapter Notes

chapter TWs in the endnote!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning following Theo's attack is oddly… *domestic*.

Bitsy is standing on a stool in front of the stove, frying a pan of eggs. The kitchen smells of coffee and cinnamon buns, and the elf is humming, the frills on her floral apron fluttering, and her ears twitching idly.

Harry is perched on the edge of the counter, Tom standing between his knees and feeding him bits of sliced fruit. He feels a bit like a spoiled prince. The events of the day before hover at the edge of his mind, threatening to spoil his calm mood, but Tom keeps him occupied with this ridiculously royal treatment.

"I can sit at the table," Harry says, his cheeks flushed, opening his mouth nonetheless so that Tom can press a ripe strawberry between his lips.

"In a moment, perhaps," Tom hums. He shifts even closer, one arm curling around Harry's waist. "I quite like you right where you are."

Harry squirms, but does not flinch away from the close contact. He opens his mouth again and this time Tom gives him a small slice of pear.

"Good boy," Tom says quietly when Harry chews and swallows. Harry makes a strangled sound and flushes even darker. Tom's mouth curves into a pleased smile, and his pupils

dilate.

-

They had woken up together in bed only a half hour before, legs intertwined, Harry's face pressed into Tom's chest, and Harry had had the fuzzy thought that he would like to spend an eternity that way, warm and safe and held.

Tom's breath had been warm, his body firmly pressed to Harry's, and one hand still wound through Harry's curls, like he had drifted off to sleep that way. Harry had hoped that his husband would be slow to wake, but it hadn't taken long before Tom's breathing had stuttered, his body tensing and then softening, his arms going almost painfully tight around Harry as he drifted into awareness.

"Good morning," Tom had said, his voice low and thick with sleep. He had dragged the pad of his thumb inquisitively over Harry's hip and Harry had shivered.

"Morning," Harry had mumbled back, his face still muffled against Tom's chest. Tom had leaned in close, had brushed his lips over Harry's cheek, and Harry had sighed contentedly. He had only complained when Tom had sat up, forcing the both of them out of bed, citing the need for a full breakfast and a walk about the grounds in the sunshine.

"I don't want to go for a walk," Harry had said.

"Then I will carry you," Tom had retorted, sounding smug, like that was the outcome he had wished for anyway, and Harry had rolled his eyes but followed his husband down into the kitchen without much more complaint.

-

You are both shameless, Azim interjects. He is looped lazily around Harry's left ankle. *If you are truly going to mate, take him back to your nest and leave me out of it.*

Tom ignores the snake. He tugs Harry closer, nearly pulling him off the counter, and Harry reflexively wraps his legs around Tom's waist. "I'll fall," he protests.

Neither of them notice Bitsy quietly turning off the stove and sidling out of the room.

"You won't fall. I have you," Tom says, and the simple words make heat bloom low in Harry's stomach. He suddenly feels nervous.

"Tom," he says quietly.

"Harry," Tom says. His gaze drags from Harry's eyes to his lips, and then to his chest, covered in one of Tom's shirts that is too big, buttoned haphazardly and falling off one shoulder. Tom's eyes follow the soft skin down to Harry's waist, to his pants, his legs wrapped around Tom like a tree trunk, clinging on for dear life.

Harry exhales a soft, panicked breath. He feels blood rushing to his groin and he shifts nervously. "Tom… put me down," he says.

"Let me have you," Tom corrects himself. His pupils have blown out even wider and he's wrapped both his arms around Harry now, pulling them snugly together, and his eyes drop to Harry's lips again.

Harry inhales shakily and presses one hand to Tom's chest. He doesn't push, he just rests it there, on Tom's skin, and he rubs his thumb over the singular mole below Tom's collarbone. "You already have me," he says quietly. "We're married, you know."

"I want *all* of you," Tom says. He leans in and presses his lips to the crux of Harry's jaw briefly before speaking again, his words humming low and hungry into Harry's skin. "I want to give you what I should have on the night of our wedding. Let me worship you. Let me erase the memory of any touch but my own."

Harry shudders. His eyelids flutter, his limbs trembling, and he goes limp in Tom's arms. "I am already yours," he rasps. "Tom—"

There is then, cutting sharply through their quickened breaths and heated murmurings, a resounding *crack* of apparition and Tom and Harry jolt apart. Harry very nearly does fall off the counter, but Tom tightens his arms and keeps him steady.

Harry blinks down at Bitsy, who he had not even realized had left the room in the first place. (He had been thinking of little else besides the feel of Tom's hands on him and how badly he had wanted to press their mouths together.) She stares worriedly at them both, wringing her hands.

"Bitsy is giving Master Riddle and Master Harry their privacy, but now she is having to shamefully interrupt, because Lord and Lady Potter have arrived and wish to speak with Master Harry, even though Master Riddle is telling Bitsy to not accept visitors under any circumstances. They are not taking no for an answer and they are not leaving."

Tom stiffens in anger, and he says something sharp back to Bitsy, but Harry doesn't really hear it.

He feels cold all over.

The soft, easy morning has ended like a shock of ice water to the face and Harry is thrown back into that room in the ministry, and Theo's sneering face, his hands pressing Harry to the floor. He is thinking of that evening with his parents, too, the one where his father had called him a whore and whipped him and his mother had looked on with cold, uncaring eyes.

Something soft cradles Harry's face for a moment, like someone's palm, and something drags carefully through his hair and Harry wants to list into the touch, to beg for more, but instead he holds himself rigidly still. He's afraid to blink, to move, and he tries to open his mouth to speak but nothing comes out.

"Harry," Tom says very firmly, and Harry hears him as though from the bottom of an endless pit of darkness. He flinches a bit, startled by the sound and Tom says something else, sounding achingly furious. Azim tries to speak as well—he is hissing wildly, traveling up Harry's leg now, slithering over Harry's waist and then finally up around Harry's neck, curling tight, but Harry can't understand either of them.

Then there are heels clacking harsh over the wood floor of the kitchen toward them, and the scent of Harry's mother's perfume balloons into the air, and the dark, suffocating magical signature of his father joins her, and Harry is gone.

-

"Explain to me," Tom says coldly, "what has possessed you to override my personal floo line and trespass on private property."

He stands directly in front of Harry, who is still frozen on the counter behind him with one hand fisted in the fabric of Tom's shirt. Tom reaches back and rests one palm over Harry's knee.

Lord Potter scoffs. "Trespass?"

“We are family, aren’t we? Are we not welcome in your home?” Lady Potter adds, sounding hurt. She clacks further into the room on her expensive heels and tries to peer around Tom at Harry. “We only wanted to confirm that our son is alright. It’s all so very dreadful, this mess with the Nott boy. If I could speak privately with Harry for a moment—”

“As you could plainly see when you stepped into our kitchen uninvited, your son is alive and in good hands,” Tom says, carefully interrupting her, shifting forward so that Harry is fully hidden from view behind him.

He wonders how he never noticed the faux-sympathetic quality of Lady Potter’s voice. Her perfectly-painted mouth is drawn with worry, her eyes glistening with tears, but he suddenly suspects none of it is genuine.

“Mummy’s here, darling,” Lady Potter says in a bit of a purr, speaking directly to Harry now, and behind Tom, Harry flinches hard and makes an odd, strangled, wheezing sound of terror.

Bitsy tugs nervously on Tom’s robes. “Master Riddle,” she says urgently. “Master Harry is —”

“Yes, I know. Thank you Bitsy,” Tom says before shooting a very hard look at the Potters. “You have your confirmation,” he says. “Now—as I expressly detailed in my owl last night, if you had cared to read it—Harry is not accepting visitors at this time. You may see yourselves out.”

James Potter steps further into the room then, slightly in front of his wife and his magic swells to a dangerous level, making every item in the kitchen hum. The dishes rattle on the table, and the kettle whistles fiercely, and the cupboard doors bang open and shut.

And Harry, still behind Tom, goes perfectly still and silent like he has just turned to stone. Tom is not even sure he is still breathing. He clenches his jaw and releases his own magic, pushing the entirety of it directly towards the Potters until they are both forced to stumble backward a few steps. Lady Potter catches herself with one hand pressed to the wall.

“Did you think to frighten me? Intimidate me in my own home?” Tom sneers. “In front of my husband?”

“He was *my son* long before we gave him over to you,” James Potter hisses, his hair windswept and his robes still fluttering from the aftershocks of magic. He is practically vibrating with rage. “You may not keep him from us. I demand that you let me speak with him at once.”

Tom’s hand around Harry’s knee goes tight enough that Harry jerks back to life, shuddering, making a nervous sound and Tom instantly loosens his grip, rubbing his thumb over his husbands bare skin in a silent apology.

“You did not *give him to me,”* Tom growls once he has reeled back most of his murderous thoughts. “Harry signed the contract of his own free will. In his *own hand.* The two of you

appeared as witnesses, nothing more. The audacity you have to now demand control of—to refer to your own child as an object to be given and taken away at will—"

Behind him, Harry flinches again, pressing his face to Tom's back.

Calm yourself, Azim hisses. *You are solving nothing with this shouting and arguing.*

"Regardless of who the boy belongs to," Lord Potter says dismissively, making Tom's blood boil, "what happened yesterday must be discussed. Mr. Nott's lawyers have already made contact with ours. He will most certainly press charges. If we do not get ahead of this immediately, the scandal that follows will be—"

"I don't give a damn about the scandal," Tom snarls. "And I have told Harry as much. Whatever the fallout may be, I will deal with it. He did nothing wrong and—whatever false information Nott's lawyers are feeding you, Harry was a victim. Nott abducted and sexually assaulted him. You *must* know this to be true."

Harry's mother makes a dissatisfied sound. "And how could we?"

She edges back further into the kitchen, picking up an empty tea cup and idly inspecting it with one perfectly-manicured hand. "Tell me this, Minister Riddle. Throughout the entirety of Harry's illicit affairs with Mr. Nott, what makes this one different? The lawyers tell us there were no witnesses to the actual assault. It comes down to Harry's word against Nott's. And what of when our Harry gets over his little tiff and decides to go back to his jilted lover, like he always does?" Lady Potter sets down the teacup with a *clink* and grins sharply at Tom, her eyes flashing. She looks like a bird of prey. Every ounce of faux-sympathy and worry has bled from her expression like they were never there in the first place. "How will you feel, knowing you have once again allowed your husband to manipulate and humiliate you? And what will you do the next time you find Harry on his hands and knees with his pants around his ankles, allowing another man to touch and take what is lawfully yours?"

Tom is clenching his jaw painfully tight, his pulse thudding so rapidly in his ears that he doesn't at first realise that Harry is speaking behind him, mumbling something over and over.

Master, Azim hisses. He sounds agitated.

"I won't," Harry is saying. "I won't, I won't, I'm sorry, I won't, I'll be good. Please, I'll be good, I didn't mean to, I'm sorry."

Tom's magic surges within him so powerfully that his mouth tastes of hot metal and the tips of his fingers begin to sting.

"Bitsy," he forces out through clenched teeth.

"Yes, Master Riddle?" the house elf says, still standing at his side. She has one hand curled protectively around Harry's ankle.

“Please remove Lord and Lady Potter from the premises immediately. I want them permanently barred from the floo and from all other points of access to our home. ”

Bitsy doesn’t hesitate. She blinks in and out of existence, appearing between the two protesting Potters, grasping them by the forearms and then disappearing once more.

Tom instantly turns around, tugging Harry into his chest, cradling the back of his head and trying to drag his husband back from whatever abyss he has fallen into once more.

“I won’t, I’m sorry, I’ll be good,” Harry is still saying, pleading, his entire body trembling, eyes wide with panic and Tom swears a low oath, tucking Harry’s face into his neck and rubbing soothing circles over his back.

“It’s alright,” he says. “I have you. They’re gone.”

Harry doesn’t seem to hear him. He is shivering, his teeth chattering and he clings to Tom like one might cling to the edge of a crumbling cliff. His legs have come up again, wrapping around Tom’s waist seemingly on instinct and so Tom stands, keeping his husband clutched tightly to his chest, and he carries him back up the stairs.

“Have I ever told you of the day I learned I was a wizard?” he hums quietly in Harry’s ear.

Harry doesn’t respond.

Tom walks them down the hall and into Harry’s chambers. “I was eleven years old. Mrs. Cole told me I had a visitor, and when she brought him up to my room, my first thought was that he looked like Father Christmas.”

Harry still doesn’t respond. He’s shivering, his breaths wheezing in and out unevenly, and he’s holding himself very rigidly still in a way that Tom knows will leave his muscles aching later.

Azim has gone oddly quiet, too. His scales have dulled, and he is practically frozen around Harry’s neck. Tom wonders if Harry’s panic has interrupted the flow of his inner magic to the snake. Or—he wonders if the little snake is holding back on purpose, closing himself off from Harry, so that Harry is not losing even a single drop of his magical reserves while he is in this heightened state of fear. He resolves to ask Azim about it later.

“He found my box of stolen things, stashed up in my wardrobe,” Tom hums next. He lies Harry down on the bed and climbs in right beside him, tugging the blankets over them and caging Harry in the warmth of his arms. “The old man made me give everything back. I was furious. But… then he told me what I was. What I had the power to do. And he promised to come back again, to teach me more, to show me how to use magic in ways that I could not yet, at that age, even begin to comprehend.”

Harry shivers a bit, then, making a little sound of distress, and Tom tightens his grip. He rubs the palm of his hand over Harry’s sternum.

“Breathe,” he says quietly. “Can you hear me, Harry?”

Harry doesn't respond.

"I hated that orphanage," Tom says. He presses one leg carefully between Harry's, so that every part of them is entangled. Harry inhales a shuddery breath and exhales in a rush. "They thought me a freak. The other boys despised me, and so I tormented them in return. I stole their things. I played tricks on their minds. And so when Dumbledore found me, and saw that I was miserable, and saw what kind of magic I could do, he took me to Hogwarts."

-

The first lucid thought Harry has, when he finally starts to resurface from his latest fog of terror, is that he is growing quite tired of these episodes.

His jaw aches from clenching it so hard, and he can feel his entire body trembling, and his chest is tight, like he hasn't taken a full breath in hours. The only respite from his discomfort is the warmth of Tom wrapped all around him.

He is talking quietly, his lips brushing across Harry's neck, his arms locked around Harry's chest, but Harry isn't quite ready to listen. He instead basks in the comforting sounds, and he registers the safe quality of Tom's voice (he doesn't sound angry, or frustrated, or scared—he sounds perfectly calm, like he is just telling Harry about his day or something else terribly mundane).

Harry doesn't think he ever suffered anything like this back in his old life. When he felt fear there, he would *never* retreat. He would push forward. He would force himself to be angry, instead, so that his fear wouldn't control him. Even at that last battle, when it was all nearly over, when Harry had walked to his death in the Forbidden Forest, he had not let his fear control him. He had felt empty, more than anything. And cold. But he had taken all the fear that he had and shoved it deep down inside, where it could not rise up like this at inopportune moments and render him entirely helpless.

But here, in this world, from the moment he woke up in that soft bed in those tight muggle jeans and with Tom Riddle's furious face staring down at him, Harry seems to have lost that particular skill.

He wonders idly if, in the act of deciding to move on, in the hope of being done with the struggle and pain of life, something had flipped in Harry's mind, and he had weakened

himself, somehow. Perhaps, in thinking that his fight was over, he had instead left himself horribly vulnerable and open to new traumas.

(Another part of him wonders if this new universe has just succeeded more fully in breaking him, like the other universe never could. Maybe this is what Harry looks like when he breaks. Maybe he will keep having these episodes in greater and greater frequencies until one day he dips beneath the surface of his mind and cannot come back out.)

"—it was the last week before summer holiday, and I of course did not want to return to the orphanage. Not after spending my first year at Hogwarts. Not after learning so much about the world of magic, and the things I could do, and my potential for greatness."

Tom breathes in and out slowly. He is rubbing the palm of his hand over Harry's sternum in slow circles. It feels nice.

"So I went to Dumbledore and I asked. Well—demanded, really. I told him I wouldn't go back. I said I would kill myself before I returned to that horrid place. I told him I'd fashion a home for myself in the deep caves of the cliffs beside the ocean, and I would teach myself magic, and I would do perfectly alright for myself, and one day I would return to take my revenge."

Tom chuckles. The movement of his chest jostles Harry a bit, and Tom utters a quiet apology, pressing somehow even closer, and his lips drag for a few soft moments along the line of Harry's neck again.

Harry almost shivers. His breath almost stutters. But he's still floating a bit, feeling achy, and tingly, and numb, and so the best he can do is take in another tight breath and hold perfectly still.

"You know what the old man did?" Tom pauses for a polite moment, giving Harry a chance to respond, before continuing. "He laughed. I still remember how furious I felt, staring at his eyes twinkling beneath those silly half-moon glasses. I screamed at him. I told him there was absolutely nothing amusing about my situation. I grabbed the most expensive-looking thing in his office and smashed it to bits." Tom chuckles again. "It was only after I had finally calmed down, after destroying about half of his things, that Dumbledore saw fit to tell me that he was not intending to send me back to the orphanage at all. He said it was a terrible mistake on the part of the Ministry that I was sent there in the first place."

Harry feels his brow furrow a bit. He takes in another breath, a deeper one this time, and the air rushes into his lungs, clearing more of the fog from his brain.

"After that, he told me they had been working on a summer program for Hogwarts students who wished to stay on over holiday. He said I was perfectly welcome to stay on in the Slytherin dorms so long as I picked up a few extra courses and if I agreed to meet with a mind healer every week to discuss my 'murderous tendencies' as he so thoughtfully put it."

Tom sounds like he is rolling his eyes. Harry, despite himself, huffs out a little laugh of breath.

“Mur— murderous tendencies?” he repeats, his breath coming out as little more than a croak.

Tom inhales rather sharply and his arms constrict tightly around Harry before loosening. He helps Harry turn onto his back, and then to sit up so they are face to face, and he cups Harry’s face with both palms.

“Hello, husband,” he murmurs. He rubs the pad of his thumb over the soft skin beneath Harry’s eye. “How are you feeling?”

“Not… not great,” Harry says, inhaling and exhaling again and then coughing. Tom presses a cool glass of water to his lips, and Harry drinks gratefully. When he’s finished, Tom sets the glass aside and then curls his arm around Harry’s back, tugging him closer.

“We didn’t finish breakfast,” Tom hums. “Is there anything you’d like Bitsy to bring up for you? Or perhaps a calming draught?”

Harry lists forward into the warmth of Tom’s arms. “Maybe in a bit,” he says. He doesn’t want to ask, but he knows he has to. He remembers nothing beyond the sound of his father’s voice and the scent of his mother’s perfume. “Are they gone?”

Tom stiffens, and his face twists, a flash of cold fury rippling over his expression and through his eyes before instantly smoothing over into calm again. “They are gone,” he confirms.

Harry sags with relief. His eyes flutter closed. Azim wakes, warm scales dragging over Harry’s collarbone, and then up Harry’s neck, like the little snake is resting his head right over Harry’s pulse point.

The three of them sit in silence for a long time, and Harry breathes in and out slowly, occasionally feeling the cold press of the glass of water at his lips and obediently drinking. He watches the warm patches of sunlight slowly shifting across the bed sheets.

“They frightened you,” Tom finally says, speaking very carefully. “Your parents. Even before they spoke, before they even entered the kitchen, you were… lost.”

Harry shifts, suddenly feeling uneasy. He doesn’t answer.

“I knew… you didn’t like your parents,” Tom goes on slowly. “I knew you resented their control over you. Their meddling in your private affairs. Their orchestration of our marriage.”

Harry remains silent. He focuses on the warm feel of Tom’s arm around him. He presses one hand to his sternum and reminds himself to keep breathing.

“I have heard the way they condescend to you. The ways in which they have tried to control you… and the ways in which you have fought back.” Tom hesitates. “I admit my foolish ignorance in taking their side, more often than not, and in thinking of you as nothing more than an immature child, and thinking that you deserved their unkind words and strict rules and that perhaps it was what you needed to set you straight. And because of this, I found

myself treating you in much the same way. Harsh words, and rules, and restrictions, and… punishments."

Harry flinches. His throat starts to feel uncomfortably tight. He tries to turn his face away from Tom, to hide himself, but Tom rests one palm on Harry's cheek once more, and he keeps their gazes locked together. Harry blinks furiously into his husband's dark brown eyes.

"I don't want to talk about my parents," he says, hating himself for how small his voice sounds. How unsteady.

"I know," Tom says gently. "I understand, Harry." His other hand slips up beneath Harry's shirt, palm pressing warm into the small of Harry's back, and Harry relaxes a little bit. Tom waits for a while, and does not speak until Harry's breath has evened out. "I only fear that, once again, I have made a gross error of judgement. And I wonder—if your parents had the gall to speak of you in such a manner in my presence, what do they say to you when you are alone? And—does their condescension extend beyond cruel words and unjust accusations?"

Harry shudders. Around his neck, Azim pulses, his scales shifting, and his tongue flicks out, rasping over Harry's skin.

"My past treatment of you was unconscionable," Tom adds quietly, the pad of his thumb tracing along Harry's hip. "I need you to understand that, love. I hurt you, and for that I will never forgive myself."

Harry's breath catches in his throat. He shudders again, ducking forward, pressing his face into the crook of Tom's neck.

Tom curls his arms fully around Harry. "I will not stand for your mistreatment any longer," he murmurs fiercely. "Nott will be dealt with. And your parents—we do not have to speak of them, of course, if you do not wish to." He lifts one hand, winding his fingers through Harry's curls. "Although I would very much like to."

"I can't," Harry says very quietly, his words muffled. "I can't." He reaches up a hand and curls his fingers around Azim's little body. He rubs his thumb over the cool scales.

Are the intruders gone? Azim asks.

Yes, Tom says, which is good, because Harry had nearly opened his mouth to respond in kind. *They will not disturb us again.*

Good, Azim says. *I did not like them. They made him smell of fear and pain.*

Tom's arms tighten around Harry. *Yes,* he says. *I think they have hurt him before. But he does not wish to tell me.*

He will when he is ready, Azim says.

Tom inhales sharply and then sighs. He pets his hand over Harry's curls once more. "It's alright." His lips brush the top of Harry's head. "I understand, my darling, but—it is plain to see, nonetheless, that you feel unsafe in their presence, and that is unacceptable."

“I— I don’t, I mean—unsafe? No, it’s not really—it’s fine—”

“You do not have to see them ever again, if that is what you wish,” Tom interrupts Harry’s panicked rambling.

Harry registers the words, and then feels a bit stunned. He lifts his head and gapes at his husband in disbelief.

They don’t make eye contact like this often. It makes Harry feel unmoored. Tom’s eyes are deep, endless wells of swirling magic, drawing him further and further in. Harry feels himself getting a bit lost staring into their depths. He waits apprehensively to feel the brush of Legilimency, to feel their minds crossing, to feel Tom sifting and sorting through Harry’s memories, but there is no contact made. The barrier of his mind remains perfectly intact, just as it has from the moment he woke in this world.

“Not ever?” Harry repeats faintly, searching Tom’s eyes for any hint of anger or deceit.

“Never,” Tom says fervently.

“No dinners? No parties? No—”

“Never.”

“What about the, erm. The contract, and—”

“Your father did not read that contract close enough,” Tom says with a wry, humorless twist to his mouth. “And that is beside the point. You signed it, Harry, not your parents. It does not matter what it says. The most important section details the freedom we both have to dissolve the marriage if we so choose.”

Somewhere, in the far recesses of Harry’s mind, he processes this information and wants to laugh at the absurdity of the situation. All of the time he’s spent in this world, months on months of being miserable, and terrified, and depressed, thinking that he was trapped, and the whole time all he had to do for his freedom was *say the words.*

Of course—where would he have gone? Back to stay with his parents?

He wonders if maybe he would have found his way to Grimmauld Place. Or maybe he would have ransacked his parent’s house, found his wand somehow, and then created a place for himself in this world where no one knew him and no one could harm him.

“Why…” Harry hesitates. “Why didn’t you divorce me, then? You were miserable.”

“So were you,” Tom says.

“You could have kicked me out and found someone better. Someone who could behave and could make you look good in the papers, and—”

Tom sighs. “It is not as easy as it looks,” he says. “And… I suppose I grew to care for you, in my own way. I had hoped that perhaps we could learn to be happy together. I thought I had

seen you at your worst, and you at mine, and so it could only be onward and up from there. And—" Tom pauses. "It can be difficult to find a partner when you have had a career like mine. So many want my life. Want to feed off my glory. My money. They want to use me. But I wasn't born with power or fame or riches. I came from nothing. I made myself the man I am today. It is exhausting to attempt to find someone who understands all of that."

Harry blinks at Tom, stupified. "And you thought *I* would be the one to—"

Tom laughs. "No, no. Hardly. But I suppose I thought I was picking the lesser evil. I would marry the enemy, so to speak, and because I already knew what kind of person you were, I wouldn't have to worry about disappointment or heartache later on. Ours would be a political partnership, nothing more, and I would never love you, because I could never trust you, and you would never want me in turn, because all you wanted was to be out from under your parent's thumb."

"And I wanted your money," Harry adds helpfully, and Tom laughs again.

"Well, yes. But not at first, remember? *That* whole mess only began when your father took away your inheritance."

"Right, yeah," Harry sighs. His eyelids finally flutter shut. He opens and closes his mouth several times, working his jaw, trying to swallow around the lump in his throat. Then he presses forward again and sinks into Tom's hold. "Okay," he says. "If you're sure, then… I don't want to. I don't want to see them anymore, please."

"As you wish," Tom murmurs.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter TWs:

dissociation
brief references to previous abduction/sexual assault
some victim blaming/slut shaming
very brief mention of past implied/referenced suicidal ideation

This one's a little shorter but the next chapter is just about ready so I'm hoping to update again fairly soon! ❤️ Thank you guys so much for your support.

Next time: Sirius writes back!

Chapter 18: 18

Chapter Summary

Tom gets brownie points and then Tom loses brownie points

Chapter Notes

TWs for this chapter: not really much that I can think of. vague references to past violence/abuse, some verbal threats of physical harm/murder, brief mention of past underaged sex work

I'm sorry for the delay, life has been overwhelming lately. thank you for all the kind comments and everyone who has been checking in! It may take me a little longer to get content out but I'm still here and still working on it every chance I get! ❤️

Sirius's response arrives very unexpectedly a few days after the fiasco with Harry's parents.

Hedwig carries the letter in, swooping through the library on white-speckled wings and alighting on his shoulder. She offers him the bit of rolled up parchment and Harry's heart leaps into his throat. For a moment all feels right and normal in the world. He could close his eyes and very well imagine that he is back at Hogwarts, or sitting at his desk in the second bedroom at Privet Drive, or spending the weekend at the Burrow. He could pretend that his owl, his first ever pet and first ever friend, didn't die the week before his seventeenth birthday in a burst of glowing green light, gone far too quickly for him to even say goodbye.

"Hello, Bernadette," Tom muses, interrupting Harry's morose thoughts.

Harry blinks, startled, tearing his gaze away from Hedwig and toward Tom, who is sitting beside him on the other end of the sofa. Harry's legs are resting in his lap, and he has a copy of the Daily Prophet in one hand, although he has been doing far less reading in the past hour and more simply staring at Harry with dark, hungry eyes that Harry has been trying in vain to ignore.

"What did you call her?" Harry asks.

Tom smiles at Harry. "Bernadette, of course," he says, like Harry is acting funny. "That is her name, after all, is it not?"

Harry looks back at Hedwig and purses his lips. "Right," he says. "Of course."

Tom eyes him curiously, and then glances down at the parchment that is clutched in Harry's fist. Harry's stomach flips and he suddenly feels nervous. He remembers, too late, that the other-Harry had been forbidden from sending letters. He wonders if that ban is still in place despite everything that has happened since. He wonders if Tom will snatch the letter away before Harry can read it, like when Harry was eleven and didn't know he was a wizard and couldn't manage to get his hands on one of the thousands of letters the school had sent.

"I didn't," Harry starts, and then pauses, searching for words, his face flushing. "I mean, I asked Bitsy? And it's only from—" his cuts off, his throat feeling tight. He shifts around on the sofa. And Azim, coiled around his neck, lifts his head and lets out a warning hiss, sensing Harry's distress.

"Harry," Tom interrupts gently, his gaze softening. He rubs his thumb over the skin of Harry's ankle, and Harry's pulse calms. "I trust you."

Harry inhales shakily and nods, his body flooding with relief. Azim lowers his head. Harry relaxes back against the sofa and pats the owl's feathers. She coos fondly and pecks at his wrist. "Thanks girl," he says quietly. He thinks that he is glad to have her in his life again, even if she is not the Hedwig he remembers. Then, unable to hold back any longer, he unrolls the letter.

Harry,

It starts out, written in cramped handwriting that is painfully unfamiliar.

I'll admit I was surprised to hear from you. After we spoke at your wedding you made it quite clear you wanted nothing to do with me.

(I'm still not sorry for the things I said. I hope you can see now that marrying that man was a mistake.)

And what's this about your wand being confiscated? Got yourself in some kind of trouble, have you? Your rich, fancy husband can't just buy you a new one?

As for myself, I'm doing alright. It's mating season at the reserve right now and they need all the hands they can get. Not a great time for visitors, and I'm fairly certain you'd be miserable here anyway. (You'd have to get very comfortable shitting in a hole.) But I've spoken with Charlie and he says they can let me off for a bit next month when things slow down. I've scheduled an international portkey into London and I'll owl you when I arrive.

Of course we can go shopping, if that's what you really want to do, you bloody ponce. Or we could do something actually *fun. How long has it been since you've gone flying? Or have you been too busy playing housewife to get out and feel the breeze on your skin?*

Harry's breath catches in his throat. He thinks of that day at Hogwarts, that final battle with Voldemort, their frantic search for the Diadem and then the fiery flight through the Room of Requirement where Malfoy had nearly perished. Harry hasn't thought of that day in weeks,

except for when it comes to him in dreams, dragging him awake in a state of panic, the bottoms of his feet feeling uncomfortably warm like the fire is still rising up to meet him, reaching out to grasp him and drag him down to his death.

“Alright love?” Tom murmurs. Harry looks up from the letter and takes in a shaky breath. His husband is watching him with a concerned gaze.

“Yeah, fine,” Harry says. He forces a smile on his face and blinks away swimming visions of fiendfyre. Tom hums, although he still seems faintly worried. He pulls on Harry’s legs until Harry shifts closer. Harry allows Tom to rearrange their positions on the sofa without complaint, and he looks back down at the parchment. He keeps reading.

And listen, Harry—I am sorry I haven’t reached out much since your wedding. It truly seemed like you were set in your choices, and I didn’t want to get in the way of that. I know you don’t like to be told what to do, and I know I’m only your cousin, but I can’t help wanting to step in when I see you doing something that I think will only lead to unhappiness. But I understand that I overstepped my boundaries. I can’t promise it won’t happen again... but if you ever need me, I’m there, no matter what.

And if you’re really in some kind of trouble, or you’re just looking to get away from the old ball and chain or that slimy git I hear has been all over you lately (Theodore Nott, Harry? Really?) you know you can always crash at Grimmauld Place. I haven’t spent much time there the past few years, but it’s just as empty as always since my folks croaked. Plenty of room to hide from the world for a bit if you ever need. You should know I’ve changed the passcode, though— just rap on the door thrice and say ‘toujours gentil.’ I think there’s a couple of spare wands in a box in the attic. I don’t care what sort of trouble you’re in, or what you’ve done—no wizard should have to go without a proper wand.

Take care of yourself, kid. See you in a bit,

-Sirius

Harry doesn’t know how long he is gaping at the parchment, reading the words over and over, drinking Sirius’s words like they contain the secrets of the universe, when he feels an arm curl around his waist.

“Everything alright?” Tom asks again.

“Yes,” Harry says absentmindedly.

“Good news or bad news?”

Harry looks up and blinks. “Hm?” he says. “Oh, er. Good… I think.” he carefully rolls up the bit of parchment, running his fingers over it once more before stowing it in the pocket of his trousers.

He can still hardly believe that Sirius exists here in this world—that he’s alive, and healthy, and sounds happy enough, and he wants to see Harry. And he had been rather kinder than he

had to be, even in his denouncement of other-Harry's choices. He had, in fact, seemed to read between the lines of Harry's very sparse letter and understood that Harry was in some kind of trouble, enough trouble to offer him an escape. (To *Grimmauld Place,* of all safe havens to exist.) Harry thinks that if he had known this was an option to him months, or even weeks ago, he would have taken it in a heartbeat. Even now he feels sorely tempted. He wonders what the place is like here in this universe. He wonders if it's just as old and gloomy, dirty, filled with cursed objects and dusty paintings and a library full of books that smell of dark magic. He wonders if Sirius's room looks the same.

"I have good news as well," Tom purrs. His hand slips beneath Harry's shirt, palm pressed to his waist.

Harry shivers. "Yeah?" he breathes, his wandering thoughts of Sirius and of safe havens and of fire and dragons scattered by the feel of Tom's hand on his skin. He blinks slowly and lists forward. "What… what is it?"

"Close your eyes."

Harry doesn't hesitate. He lets his eyelids drift shut, and he waits patiently for whatever it is that his husband is going to show him. Tom wraps his hand around Harry's right wrist and tugs it forward, palm up, and then he presses something long and slim into it. The air suddenly smells thickly of magic, of power, of a wooded forest at sundown and a sky riddled with distant stars. Harry makes a startled sound. He curls his fingers around the wood.

The wand isn't his.

Harry knows that immediately, reflexively, just by the way it sits slightly off in his hand and the way it hums to life almost discordantly, vibrating at first with a bit of bemusement, like it recognizes Harry's flesh and blood but not his spirit and not the true magical core inside him.

But, still— hum to life it does, sending tingles all over his skin, raising goose pimples and jumpstarting his pulse. It's not Harry's own wand, the one from his old life, the one that had shared its core with Voldemort's and that had been splintered to pieces and then put back together with the elder wand. No—this wand that Harry holds in his hand now is most definitely the wand that belonged to other-Harry, the one that was confiscated after he tried and failed to confund an auror. And now it is here in Harry's hands, ready and willing to be used.

Harry opens his eyes and stares down at it for a moment in disbelief and then looks at Tom. "My wand?" he says stupidly.

"Yes," Tom says.

"How—" Harry looks back down at the wand. "How did you get it? Why— I thought my father said—"

"It belongs to you," Tom says. His eyes harden a bit. "It should have been returned long ago. It should never have been taken in the first place."

Harry squeezes the wand tightly, feeling the magic pulsing, and he swallows. His throat feels thick. He hadn't known that Tom was going to Potter Manor, or that he was going to speak with Harry's parents. "Did he— I mean, did he really give it back, just like that? Did he say anything? Did my mother—"

"I had a chat with Lord Potter," Tom says. His eyes are still hard, with a distant look in them, and his jaw is clenched. "He was *very* happy to give up your wand once I made it clear to him what would be the alternative."

"Oh…" Harry says. He presses his lips together. He hesitates. "What did he—say? Did he say anything about—"

"Nothing civilized enough to be repeated. Do not dwell on it, darling," Tom says. "Your father has revealed his true nature and I have warned him not to come near you again. He has hurt you quite enough, I think." Tom opens his mouth and then closes it, like he was going to say more and thought better of it.

Harry presses his lips together. "What about my mother?" he asks. "Was she—was she there? Did she—did they say anything—"

"Harry," Tom interrupts gently. He reaches up and cards one hand through Harry's curls. "No, your mother was not there. Your father did not tell me anything that I did not already know." Tom pauses for a moment. "I considered using Legilimency."

Harry freezes. He stares at Tom in horror. "Did you?"

"No," Tom says again. His eyes go very soft. He cradles Harry's cheek in his palm. "I did not. Would you have permitted me to?"

"No."

Tom nods his head, unsurprised. Then his brow furrows, and he tugs Harry a little bit closer. "I had hoped that *you* would tell me," he says quietly. "I know your father has treated you cruelly. I know they have hurt you. I want to know what they've done, so that I can make them pay. So that I can understand the extent of your pain; so that you do not have to suffer alone. Let me take on some of your burden."

Harry lowers his eyes. He worries at his lower lip. "I have suffered alone all my life," he says. "It has always been my burden to bear."

Tom makes a sound. It comes from low in his throat, like a whine, and when Harry's eyes dart up, Tom looks heartbroken. He rubs the pad of his thumb over Harry's cheek. "Not any longer," he pleads. "I am here with you. I am here if you would let me in. If you would trust me."

Harry blinks at him. He swallows. The sound is ridiculously loud in the silence of the room, in the proximity of their mouths and their eyes locked together. "I can't," he says hoarsely. "I can't. I'm sorry. I… I just can't."

Harry's not sure if he's relieved or disappointed that his father has not revealed the truth of what happened that night. He thinks that it would be rather nice to have no more secrets between them. A part of him aches for Tom to know him completely—to see him for who he is, who he *really* is, so that Harry can stop trying to be someone that he's not.

And another part of Harry desperately wants Tom to *never* know.

He wants to forget that it ever happened at all. Not just that night with his mother and father, but—all of it, even from his life before this one, every moment where he has witnessed death and pain and every time he has hurt someone and every time the world has shown exactly how cruel it can be to those who are undeserving. He wants to go into his mind like a muggle surgeon would with a scalpel and scrape all of the grime and muck and rot and everything out that makes him hurt. And he wants to chuck it all in the bin and start over with a new brain, a mind that is smooth and soft and not riddled with horrifying twists and turns that even now wake him in the night screaming for help.

And—Harry wonders what his parents will do in retaliation when they finally get him alone. (He is not naive enough to think that they won't, despite Tom's constant platitudes. Bad people will always find a way.) This time, at least, Harry will be ready. He will have Azim and he will have his wand and he will not kneel again.

Tom draws their gazes together, dragging Harry's attention back to the present moment. "It is alright. Merlin knows I have not done nearly enough to gain your trust in this matter. We will revisit the subject another time. Do not dwell on it," he says again, his tone gentle but firm, his eyes knowing.

Harry swallows hard. He blinks again, his breath stuttering, and he licks his lips. Tom's eyes drop to Harry's mouth, and his eyes darken.

"Thank you," Harry says quietly. "For the wand. *My* wand."

Tom's face twists. He drags his gaze reluctantly up from Harry's lips to meet his eyes again. "Do not thank me," he starts, but Harry doesn't let him finish. He's grown weary of the heavy conversation. He leans in closer, resting his own palm on Tom's chest, and he lets his lips brush very quickly over Tom's cheek in a facsimile of a kiss. Tom, beneath him on the sofa, goes very still.

"You did this for me. You didn't have to," Harry murmurs.

Tom's hand curls around his hip. He pulls Harry closer. "Yes, I did."

Harry inhales shakily. He's perched over Tom's lap now, knees spread, resting on either side of Tom's hips on the sofa, their chests pressed together and breaths mingled and warm. Tom keeps one arm hooked around Harry's waist, the weight of it heavy in a way that makes Harry's breath stutter.

He knows that all he would have to do now is lean a little bit closer, lower his head, close his eyes, and slot his lips alongside Tom's. Tom seems to be waiting for it. He's still holding himself abnormally still, with bated breath, his eyes dilated like he knows exactly what Harry

is thinking and doesn't dare interrupt him. There is a buzz of gentle, coaxing magic humming between them, warm and shimmery, and it's making Harry feel a bit lightheaded. He wants to chase that feeling. He wants Tom to kiss him again, like they did that day so many weeks ago now, hot and feverish and frantic until he's squirming and gasping for breath.

"Would you…" Harry starts, a little breathily, feeling warm all over, not quite sure exactly what he's about to ask for, but then—

The wand pulses in his hand again, vibrating impatiently, like it can't believe it has been locked away for so long only to be rudely ignored. Harry's line of thought is once more interrupted and he blinks rapidly, looking down at the wand that is not his own but that he already feels quite fond of. He smiles. He hefts the weight of it in his palm. He rubs his thumb inquisitively along the smooth wood.

And now, he is not thinking of mouths pressed together and hitching breaths and fiery touches. He is thinking of fifth year, the Room of Requirement, and spells flying, his hair standing on end from the magic in the air, and the ache in his palms from a long day of spellcasting. He is thinking of his patronus and the red light of the stunner and of dodging behind gravestones and prophecy spheres and a heart that is beating not from the adrenaline of pleasure but from having to make a split-second decision that could lead to life or death.

"Yes?" Tom prompts.

"Would you excuse me for a moment?"

"Excuse—" Tom falters. He blinks up at Harry, bemused, his lips parted and his eyes still dilated. "Excuse you?" he curls his hands a little bit tighter around Harry's waist. "What do you—"

"Thanks," Harry says, kissing Tom's cheek again and then scrambling off his lap.

"Harry—"

"I haven't had my wand back in ages," Harry calls over his shoulder. "I need the practice."

"But, Harry, my love, sweetheart, we were in the middle of—"

"I'll see you at dinner!"

-

Harry grows accustomed to his new wand rather quickly, all things considered. He shakes off his guilt over using someone else's wand due to necessity. It wouldn't make sense, now, to ask for something different. And much like when Harry had borrowed Hermione's wand during the horcrux hunt, or when he had taken Malfoy's wand after Bellatrix's torture, Harry knows that sometimes you just need a wand, even if its not the right fit, and even if it belongs to someone else. And although he is loath to use it in front of Tom at first, to reveal too much of his experience, Harry doesn't hesitate to squirrel himself away in any-odd room of the manor to review his spell-casting knowledge once Tom returns to his regular work schedule at the ministry.

It brings Harry a sharp thrill each time he performs a spell correctly. Moreso when Bitsy is watching, perched on the windowsill of the empty ballroom with her knees tucked up to her chest, watching him with sparkling eyes and Azim nestled around her tiny throat. She doesn't seem to care much about his technique, or the kinds of spells that he casts, but she is just delighted to see him up and about, excited about something for once, and working hard enough that when lunch and dinner come around he is always hungry and he eats his meals without complaint.

And although Harry is uneasy at first when Tom stumbles upon one of his secret practice sessions, he quickly learns that his husband will not punish him for performing magic, no matter how big or small the spell, no matter if he accidentally burns a scorch mark into the gleaming wood floors or turns Tom's hair bubblegum pink. Each time he feels less and less fearful when Tom only laughs, smiling fondly at Harry, waving a hand over himself to return his appearance to normal, or snapping his fingers to fix whatever piece of furniture it is that Harry has irreparably damaged.

"I'm sorry," Harry says every time, breathless, his face white and heartbeat stuttering. He always grips his wand extremely tight, like he thinks he would be able to maintain his hold on it if Tom really tried to take it away.

"If you despised the colour of my hair so ardently, you should have said so. I'd much prefer an emerald green, or perhaps mauve."

"Mauve," Harry had repeated, squinting suspiciously at his husband.

"Yes," Tom had said. Then he had straightened up, fixing the sleeves of his robes, and had leveled his wand at Harry with a playful look. "Shall we continue?"

Their duels are nothing more than lighthearted games, a way to get moving and get their blood pumping, and something finally for Harry to do other than read or sketch or pester Bitsy. Harry cannot risk revealing the extent of his skill. The other-Harry certainly wouldn't have learned the same range of spells Harry had to learn during the war. And it is good, too, that they take it easy, that they don't push the spells too far, because there are times when Harry sees a spell flying from Tom's wand and he sees a glint of red in Tom's eye and for a split-second he forgets where he is and which Tom he is dealing with.

So, Harry paints himself as an amateur spellcaster. A Hogwarts student that slacked off in Defense Against the Dark Arts and only remembers the most rudimentary of spells. Someone who never participated in the Dueling Club. And this works well for him, for the most part. Except for when it backfires.

-

“You know, I wouldn’t really call it a duel,” Tom teases one afternoon a week or so later. He’s standing a few feet from Harry, tossing his wand lazily in the air and smiling wide.

(Harry likes how Tom looks during these mock-duels—at ease, and calm, playful, like a much younger man without the weight of the wizarding world on his shoulders. His cheeks fill with colour and his hair is always slightly ruffled, and it makes Harry want to throw down his wand and tackle him until they tumble to the ground, and he wants to press their mouths together, and run his fingers through Tom’s waves and see if they are as soft as they look.)

“Not a duel?” Harry repeats, rolling his eyes. He shoots an orange jet of light toward Tom, a basic giggling jinx, and Tom lazily bats it away with his hand. “And I suppose you’re the expert, are you?”

“Of course I am,” Tom says smoothly. “They don’t make just anyone the minister of magic, you know.”

Harry instantly thinks of Fudge, and he bites his tongue. “Right,” he says skeptically.

“If it were a proper duel, we would begin by facing each other with our wands up,” Tom continues. He shoots a wordless spell at Harry, a shimmering gold light, like a muggle firework, and Harry steps out of the way to dodge it, although he makes sure to wobble a bit, and pinwheel his arms, so it looks like he’s having a harder time than he actually is.

“We are facing each other,” Harry reasons.

“Then we would bow,” Tom goes on, ignoring Harry. He shoots another jet of light. It’s yellow this time, so dazzling it hurts Harry’s eyes. He steps in the other direction to avoid it.

“Bow?” Harry repeats.

Tom nods. “Of course,” he says. “As a show of respect to each other. As wizards on equal footing.”

Harry blinks. “I wouldn’t bow,” he says suddenly. “Not to you.”

And he's thinking faintly that perhaps duelling Tom wasn't so good of an idea, after all, and that perhaps he shouldn't have let it go this far. He should have kept his distance from Tom and he should have continued practising his magic in secret. Because he's beginning to feel sort of sick, a festering feeling in his stomach, and his throat is tight, and his vision is swimming. He's thinking of a dark night, a graveyard filled with shattered headstones, and a circle of men and women dressed in black robes with skull masks. He's remembering pain and blood and the sharp cut of a knife over his forearm and Cedric's pale face and a small, bony body getting thrown into a cauldron and a breeze that smelt like burning flesh and dark magic.

Tom doesn't notice the mood shift. He laughs, throwing his head back, exposing the line of his throat, and then fixes a teasing stare on Harry. "Oh, you wouldn't, would you?" he muses. He takes a step closer to Harry and levels his wand, like he's preparing another spell. "Such disrespect."

Harry swallows dryly. He doesn't respond.

"I could make you," Tom says idly.

Harry takes an immediate step back. "Would you?" he says.

Tom's smile falters. He lowers his wand a fraction. "Harry—"

"Would you?" Harry repeats. "Would you make me bow to you?"

Tom lowers his wand completely. It dangles at his side. "No," he says. "Certainly not, my love. I was only—I was teasing. I thought we were—we were just having a laugh. Of course I wouldn't—"

"I don't find that very funny at all," Harry says.

Tom's eyes flicker. He takes another step toward Harry, and Harry takes another step back. "Harry," Tom says, pleading, seeming bewildered. "I'm sorry—"

"No, it's fine. It's just… It's fine. I'm going to bed," Harry says, taking another step back, and then another, and then he shoves his wand in his pocket and turns away.

"It's only seven," Tom says from behind him. "Harry, please—"

"Goodnight," Harry says.

-

Tom hadn't meant to snoop.

Really.

He had only wanted to check on his husband, that's all.

In the days and weeks following Theo's attack at the ministry, and the unwelcome intrusion of Lord and Lady Potter the morning after, Harry had swung wildly between bouts of depression and days of pleasant calm. Tom had hoped that finally returning Harry's wand would stabilize him enough; that it would help him feel safe here, in Riddle Manor, where he should have always felt safe.

And Tom had certainly been troubled by the level of effort it had taken to wrestle the wand from Lord Potter's grasp.

"Lord Potter refuses to relinquish it," Miss Granger's patronus had stated primly, the silvery otter floating near his ear. Harry had been snoozing on the sofa, nestled into Tom's side, and he had made a sleepy sound.

"Hush, my darling, it is nothing," Tom had murmured, running his fingers through Harry's curls.

"He insists that the wand came into his possession legally, and he stands by his belief that Mr. Potter— I mean, Harry, is not mentally stable enough to use magic. He says he will not place a weapon back into the hands of a deranged child."

Tom's lip had curled. He had clenched his jaw and dismissed the patronus with a flick of his fingers.

"Deranged?" Harry had mumbled.

"No," Tom had said quietly. "You are not a child, my love. And you are no more deranged than I am."

"Mmh," Harry had responded. He had turned his head, pressing his face to Tom's thigh, and had fallen back asleep.

And Tom had resolved to go to Potter Manor himself. He would retrieve the wand, one way or the other, and he would return to Harry what was rightfully his.

-

“You take liberties,” the elder Potter had said, glaring coldly at Tom upon his arrival. “I am beyond astonished that you would open communication so soon after barring me and my wife from visiting our only son.”

“Harry is not up for discussion,” Tom had said sharply. “I am here to retrieve my husband’s property and that is all.”

“Harry’s property?” James Potter had laughed. “The boy owns nothing of his own. Everything he has was paid for with our family’s stores, or with your own. He is a moneyless, jobless, talentless whore with nothing to show for himself except a few counts of underage prostitution and a box of jewelry he stole from our family vault, and I expect he’s already sold all of that for more drug money.”

Tom’s vision had gone white for a moment. “Keep his name out of your filthy mouth,” he had hissed.

Lord Potter had smiled sharply. “Does hearing the truth about your husband make you uncomfortable?” he had said. “I thought you didn’t care what he did. If you did, you wouldn’t have let him flaunt himself all over wizarding Britain with the likes of Theodore Nott.”

“I am not his keeper,” Tom had said very coldly. “He makes his own decisions. But I will not allow you or anyone else to harm him or shame him for his actions.”

“If I were you, I would be keeping him on a much shorter leash. He was behaving better when you had him confined to the manor like a proper bitch.”

Tom had crossed the room in a flurry of furious movement. “Careful,” he had snarled. He had pressed his wand right into Lord Potter’s throat. “There are no witnesses here. My moral code does not follow the bounds of wizarding law.”

“You can’t—”

“Give me a reason,” Tom had said. He had stared into Lord Potter’s eyes. A little press, a little push, and he could see exactly what the man was thinking. He could see what he had done to Harry. The truth, finally, of Harry’s childhood and his relationship to his parents and why he was so frightened all the time and why he woke up screaming in the night. An instant, that’s all it would take. A fraction of a second inside this man’s mind.

Lord Potter had flinched. His eyes had flickered, his Occlumency walls slamming down into place. “You wouldn’t dare,” he had said. “It’s not legal for personal use. I’ll have you sent to Azkaban.”

“I know you’ve hurt Harry,” Tom had murmured. He had pushed his wand harder into Potter’s throat. It didn’t matter that the man had been trained in the mind arts. Tom had

learned to break down those walls when he was still a child. It would be like slicing through butter. “I just don’t know *how.* He won’t tell me. Do you think I care about Azkaban?”

“And what would your precious husband do then, hm? You’d leave him alone to fend for himself? He’d go crawling right back to Nott, he would.”

“You don’t know your own son.”

“You don’t know him any better than I do.”

“I could break you,” Tom had said very quietly. “I could turn your mind into mush. It would be easy. I could sift through your memories over and over until they go rotten. Until you don’t know up from down. They’d have you committed to St. Mungo’s. And no one would believe you when you told them who did it to you. You probably wouldn’t even remember, yourself. You’d be like a helpless child, drooling and crying and pissing in your pants because no one would be there to look after you, not even your own wife and certainly not your child, who would have been better off had he never known you at all, even had it made him an orphan like myself.”

Lord Potter’s face had paled. “You wouldn’t dare,” he had said. He had scrabbled for his wand, had tried to push Tom away, but Tom hadn’t relented. He had prodded his wand forward again until Lord Potter made a choking sound, his eyes bulging. Only then did Tom let go and take a step back.

“Harry will tell me in his own time,” Tom had said. His hands had twitched. “That is the only thing that stays my wrath now. And rest assured that he will. And when I learn what you’ve done, your punishment will come swift and fierce. Whatever you’ve done to my husband I will unleash upon you tenfold.”

James Potter’s eyes had darkened. He had looked terribly vicious for a moment. “If you think I’m going to sit around and wait—”

“I don’t care what you do,” Tom had said. “I don’t care where you go. But if you come near Harry again, I will find you, and I will kill you. Now— I will not ask again. Give me Harry’s wand or I will find it myself and I will destroy everything in my path along the way.”

-

And so Tom had had quite a lot to ruminate on, as he watched Harry practicing with his newly-returned wand and as he thought about his conversation with James Potter.

He had wanted to talk with Harry, to press him for answers, but he had known that wouldn't get him anywhere. And there were sometimes days where Tom wasn't sure what Harry was more afraid of—his parents, or Tom himself. He had seen the look in his husband's eye during their duel. Harry had been terrified. He had looked at Tom like he was some kind of madman. He had fled the room without looking back, spent the rest of the evening sequestered in his chambers, and had not come to sleep with Tom, which was perfectly alright of course, although Tom was so accustomed to sharing the bed at this point that he could not get to sleep and he could not stop thinking about Harry.

So he had gotten out of bed. He had walked himself across the manor, all the way to Harry's room.

Just to check on him.

And when Tom had gotten close enough, he had heard the telltale sound of the bath running. He had picked up faint sounds of Bitsy singing, and Harry's quiet sobs. Tom had felt a cold hand seize his heart. He had sunk down there, against the wall, listening to his husband cry in the bath at three in the morning when he should have been sound asleep in bed, curled up in Tom's arms, tucked underneath a warm blanket.

"Master Harry must breathe," Bitsy had said in response to the hitching and hiccuping of Harry's breath. "He must be remembering he is safe and in his chambers in the manor of Master Riddle where no one will hurt him."

"I know," Harry had said, his voice sounding thick. "I'm trying."

There had been the sound of water splashing, and Bitsy's humming, and after a while Harry had sighed, his sobs finally abating.

"Is Master Harry telling Bitsy this time what he is dreaming of?"

"No, Bitsy. I'm sorry. Not tonight."

Bitsy had made a sound of discontent, but hadn't sounded surprised. She had only continued with the bath, asking Harry easier questions here and there, like "is the water being warm enough for Master Harry," or "does Master Harry want his pyjamas or his soft and fluffy bathrobe," or "is Master Harry going back to sleep now or is he going to find Master Riddle or is he going to the kitchen to watch Bitsy bake treacle tart?"

Harry had sniffed. "Treacle tart sounds good," he had said, his voice sounding a bit watery. "But I'm… I'm still feeling a bit tired, Bitsy. I think I'll stay here for a while longer. If that's alright."

"Master Harry is the boss," Bitsy says with a sigh, and Harry laughs.

The sound of it sends warmth through Tom's veins. He flinches, hard, in his spot against the wall. He doesn't think he's ever heard his husband laugh like that.

"I thought Tom was the boss," Harry teases.

"Master Tom is not here right now, so Master Harry is the boss," Bitsy says, and Harry laughs again. There is the sound of water sloshing, and quiet steps, like Harry is climbing out of the bath and Bitsy is helping him into a soft robe.

"Thank you Bitsy," Harry mumbles. Then there are more soft sounds, the creaking of a mattress, the ruffling of drapes, and a wardrobe sliding shut.

"Master Harry is coming down for breakfast in three hours," Bitsy says firmly. "He is not spending the morning in bed."

"I know," Harry sighs. "I will. I'll come down, I promise."

Bitsy hums. There is a soft pop, like she has just disapparated, and then Harry's room falls into a muffled silence. Harry shuffles around a bit, the blankets shifting, and Tom hears a quiet creak, and then the ruffling of pages, like Harry has just cracked open a book. And then the soft, smooth, lilting hiss of Azim filters into the silence.

Why do you not go to your mate? You are distressed.

I am not distressed, Harry responds.

It takes Tom, still standing out in the hall, an embarrassing amount of time to understand the magnitude of what he has just overheard. Harry and Azim continue to talk quietly with each other, to bicker, really, and Tom feels the blood slowly drain from his face. His breath grows shallow. His hands curve into claws. He has to press one against the wall to steady himself. A tight ball of magic awakes in his chest.

—*walk all the way over there, and wake him up, and I don't want to,* Harry is saying in the next moment when Tom tunes back in.

Yes I think you do, Azim says.

Harry makes an annoyed sound. The bed creaks, and blankets shift, and then there is the sound of a page turning.

Tom shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

He wants to go in. He *needs* to go in. To see with his eyes what he is hearing with his ears. To know of a surety that his husband is speaking a language of which, for the duration of Tom's life, he has been the *only known speaker.* When Harry speaks again, Tom lurches forward, pressing his ear to the wood of the door so as to hear more clearly.

—*starting to forget,* Harry hisses quietly, sounding sad. *Sometimes the only way I can really see them is in my dreams.*

Nightmares, you mean, Azim says.

And when I take the sleeping potion, it gets worse, Harry says. *Every day I lose more details. The shape of their faces begins to blur.*

They are remnants of your old life, Azim hisses. *One that is no more. Are you not here now, flesh and blood, in this body with a heart that beats? Is that not what matters most? Have you not found a home in your mate? Are you not happy?*

Harry sighs. It seems like they have had this argument before. Tom, who has certainly not heard any of this, casts a silent charm to help him pick up Harry's muted response.

Yes, I… Harry pauses. *I am happy here. Or at least… I think I could be happy. It's not a bad life. But I can never tell Tom the truth. I can never be my true self with him. And what kind of life is that, for him or for me?*

You fear him because of your past. Azim says. *If you would speak to him plainly, if you would voice your troubles, perhaps—*

I can't, Harry interrupts. *I can't, Azim. It's not worth the risk. He can never know. He can never know, do you understand? Do you promise me? You have to promise me.*

Yes, Azim says after a prolonged silence. *Of course, hatchling.*

Thank you, Harry says. They lapse into silence, the two of them, and all Tom hears for a while is Harry's quiet breaths, and the shuffling pages of whatever book he is reading. Occasionally there is the scratching of a quill over parchment and incoherent mumbling, like Harry is talking to himself.

Tom stays there in the hall, his back pressed to the wall. He tries to think clearly over the rushing in his ears. The silky smooth sound of Harry's parseltongue is making his palms sweat and his heart race. He wants nothing more than to go inside and confront Harry and finally get the answers to his questions which have been building up day by day. He wants to delve into his mind and sort and sift until there are no secrets left between them. Instead, he listens to his husband reading in silence until the sound of pages turning slows and then stops, and then Harry sighs heavily, and shifts around in the blankets some more, and—there is a quiet thud, like the book has just fallen from the bed to the floor. Harry makes another sleepy sound, and then falls fully silent.

Tom knows that the right thing to do, now, would be to return to his own chambers. But before he quite realises what he is doing, he has stood and wrapped his hand around the door knob. He pushes his way inside the darkened room.

Harry is lying on his side beneath a mound of blankets, snoring quietly. Tom steps closer, taking soft, careful steps on the wood floor.

His husband is looking far better than he did a month or two ago. The sallowness to his cheeks has filled out, and his body is holding less tension. The reinstatement of Harry's wand has clearly benefited his well being. The almost-always present furrow to his brow has

relaxed. And—Harry smells soft and clean, like orange-scented soap, his damp hair drying into little spirals on the silk pillowcase. Tom reaches out and runs his fingers lightly through the curls.

Harry shifts. His brow instantly furrows. “Mione?” he mumbles, his eyelids fluttering.

“Hush,” Tom murmurs, feeling guilty, and oddly jealous at the utterance of his secretary’s name instead of his own. He withdraws his hand. “No, it’s nothing, darling. Only a dream.”

Harry sighs and squirms around a bit before going limp underneath the blankets again. One of his arms is out in the open, hanging down the side of the mattress, and Tom is reaching down to tuck it beneath the blankets when his eyes catch on the book that Harry must have been reading. He picks it up instead.

The title reads *Advanced Occlumency Shields: Protecting the Mind from External Threats* . Tom stares down at it incredulously.

“Mind arts?” he mutters to himself.

He flips the book open to a random page somewhere in the middle and sees that the columns are all filled with a cramped handwriting that must be Harry’s, although it doesn’t look much like the elegant, looping cursive he usually writes in. The notes are instead sporadic, and hard to understand, saying cryptic things like,

‘gryffindor common room — Sirius floo, fourth year,’

and

‘flying… third year quidditch finals’

Which doesn’t make sense at all, because Harry was a pureblood Slytherin through and through, and— as far as Tom knows, the last time Harry touched a broomstick he was a child, and the only sort of recreation he participated in at Hogwarts was skipping class to smoke gillyweed in the girl’s lavatory with Malfoy. (And Tom only knows *that* because it’s a black mark on Harry’s permanent record.) And there are more things written, even more confusing statements, like—

‘cupboard—stronghold—absolute last resort, makes me dive too deep … haven’t learned how to come back out—Bitsy thought I overdosed on Sleeping Draught last time—’

and a very odd list of items that seem to have nothing in common.

‘THINGS TO AVOID THINKING ABOUT AT ALL COSTS:

sixth year—the astronomy tower

the cave

the diary

the orphanage

Wormtail, the graveyard

Cedric

Malfoy Manor

Slughorn's memory

the locket'

and— there are a lot of things on this list that are entirely illegible, scribbled out so harshly that the ink has nearly torn through to the other side of the paper. Tom squints at it, holding the book up in the faint moonlight, but he cannot decipher them at all except for one word ending in -*crux.*

Tom feels utterly bewildered.

It had been startling enough to stumble upon his husband in the library that day, months ago now, curled up with a mug of hot cocoa—not even spiked with fire whiskey or dragon's claw, no, just regular old hot cocoa—and Tom's old copy of the Hobbit clenched in his hands.

Tom had thought, for just one wild moment, that he had walked in on a complete stranger.

Harry has always abhorred the mind arts. He had known of Tom's mastery of Legilimency, and had demanded that Tom swear on his magic that he would never use his skill to delve into Harry's mind unless given express permission. It had hardly been an inconvenience to agree. Legilimency was already illegal throughout nearly the entire wizarding world, excepting in cases that were handled with the strictest of supervision by law enforcement. Tom had learned at a young age, taught by Dumbledore himself, to control his impulse to delve into each mind he encountered. And with his husband, who had very often had his mind terribly clouded anyway, either by excessive alcohol intake or some other illicit drug, Tom had never felt an ounce of temptation to break his rules.

Until now. Tom stares down at his husband, who is still sleeping peacefully on the bed. Harry makes a sleepy sound, his brow furrowing and then smoothing out.

How long have you been studying Occlumency, dear husband? Tom murmurs in Parseltongue, his eyes dark and curious. *How long have you spoken in the sacred tongue of snakes?*

Have you finished your invasion of our nest? Azim asks, and Tom jerks, his eyes going to the little snake which is coiled around Harry's neck.

Yes, he responds quietly.

You should not have been listening. He did not wish for you to hear.

Will you tell him? Tom asks.

The snake is quiet for a while. *No,* it says. *He will only panic. He does not yet know that you mean him no harm.*

Harry shifts. He makes another sleepy sound. His arm, still hanging bare out of the sheets, twitches.

Tom leans carefully down and takes Harry by the elbow, lifting his arm and tucking it back into the blankets, but when he finishes, he looks up and meets a pair of bright green accusing eyes.

“What are you doing?” Harry asks, no trace of drowsiness in his tone.

Tom falters. A bolt of unease shoots down his spine. He drops his grip on Harry’s arm and makes to back away, but Harry wraps his own hand tightly around Tom’s wrist and yanks him to a standstill.

“Why do you look like that?” Harry asks, his eyes trailing over Tom’s face like an indecipherable map.

“Like what?” Tom asks, balking. “It’s just— it’s just me, love. It’s Tom. There’s not—”

“Which Tom?”

Tom gapes at him. “Which…?”

Which Tom are you? Harry repeats in Parseltongue, impatient, his grip going so tight around Tom’s wrist that it’s painful. Tom lets out a breath of startled air and his hands flex.

“Your husband,” he says, for lack of knowledge of what else Harry is expecting him to say. His heart thuds unevenly in his chest. “Tom Marvolo Riddle, your husband.”

Harry stares at him a while longer, his eyes wide and calculating and then he nods sharply, finally releasing his grip. His eyelids flutter and he suddenly seems exhausted. “Okay,” he mumbles. “My husband, Tom. That’s right. Good.”

Tom watches as Harry slumps back down into the sheets. He curls his arms up tight to his chest and presses his cheek to the pillow. The furrow to his brow smooths, and in a matter of minutes, he has begun to quietly snore again.

It takes a long time for Tom’s heart to stop racing. He stares beseechingly at Azim, hoping for answers, for some kind of explanation, but the snake only stares back at him in silence. Tom sets the book carefully right where he found it, face down on the floor beside the bed. He longs to take it with him, to continue studying it, but he is certain that Harry would remark on its absence.

He does not want to rouse any suspicion.

(Better for Harry to think he was dreaming.)

Chapter 19: 19

Chapter Summary

Tom plays a dangerous game and experiences Consequences™

Chapter Notes

If you saw the chapter count increase... no you didn't 👀

TWs for this chapter in the end note, along with a snippet for next time!
This also ends on a cliffhanger, so if you hate cliffhangers feel free to wait until my next update lmao ❤️

p.s. I struggled with this chapter so please be kind to me

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry doesn't know exactly what marks the change in Tom's behavior toward him, although it must happen sometime after he is given his wand. For a while he doesn't notice, too busy practising magic and enjoying his newfound freedom. But then there is a morning where Harry and Tom are outside, and Harry is sprawled over a blanket on the warm grass, lying on his stomach and tracing idle doodles into his sketchbook and Tom is just…

Staring.

Watching, more like. His eyes are dark and narrowed on Harry, calculating, his pupils dilated. He has a stack of paperwork at his side that he has not paid a moment of attention to since they came outside. Instead, he is simply watching Harry draw. Harry tries to ignore it for a while. But he gets sick of the prickling feeling on the back of his neck. Tom is always watching him, of course, but—not like *this*. For once, Tom does not look like he is thinking idly of ravishing Harry on the grass. He looks rather more like a police detective on the verge of uncovering some kind of sinister plot wherein Harry is at the epicenter.

"Is something wrong?" Harry finally asks, twisting sideways, resting his weight on his elbow and squinting at Tom.

Tom blinks. His head jerks, his hands flexing, and his eyes return to a less psychotic tilt. He smiles at Harry. "No," he says. "Nothing is wrong, darling."

Harry's not sure he believes that. "Well, you're acting weird," he says, sitting all the way up, closing his sketchbook and setting it to the side. "You're staring."

"No, I am not," Tom says. His cheeks flush ever so slightly. He pats around on the blanket and picks up a random bit of parchment. "I—have paperwork. I am very busy—"

"Are you upset with me for something?" Harry asks with a yawn. He stretches his legs out, trousers rolled up to just below his knees, and Azim clinging to his left ankle. His toes brush across the grass at the edge of the blanket. "I feel like you're upset."

"No," Tom says, his mouth set in a grim frown. His eyes darken again, flitting down to rove over Harry's bare calves before coming back up. "Why on earth would I be upset with you?"

Harry is a bit stumped by that. He falls silent. Tom continues staring down at his parchment in the meantime, although Harry can tell he is not actually reading it, and his eyes keep darting up to stare at Harry. And then Harry remembers something from that day at the ministry with Theo, and his face pales.

"What is it?" Tom asks.

"Well," Harry hesitates. He looks down at the blanket and fidgets with a bit of loose thread. "Has he sent the photos already? Theo, I mean."

Tom blinks at him, seeming startled. He sets down his parchment. "Photos? What photos, Harry?"

Harry worries at his lower lip and shrugs. A pit forms in his stomach. He wishes he had kept his mouth shut. "Nevermind," he says.

"No," Tom returns, shifting closer to Harry and resting a hand on his shoulder. He squeezes it gently. "Please tell me what you mean, darling. I can see that it's troubling you, whatever it is."

And Tom doesn't look suspicious or vaguely angry now. His eyes have gone soft, and he seems a bit frustrated with himself. He reaches out with his other hand and tidies Harry's curls which have fallen over his eyes, ruffling with the faint breeze.

"I don't want you to be angry," Harry says.

"My love," Tom says. "You have nothing to fear from me. Do you understand? I will not be angry with you, no matter what it is that you must tell me."

"You don't know that for sure."

"Yes, I—"

"When you're angry," Harry says, "you don't think. You only act. You dragged me out of the ministry party that night and you squeezed my arm so tight that I thought it would bruise."

Tom sucks in a sharp breath.

“And then you locked me out of the library,” Harry goes on. “Which was the only place in the manor that I had ever felt an ounce of happiness. You took it from me because you thought I deserved it. You didn’t care how it hurt me.” Harry can’t look at Tom’s face any longer, which is now filled with devastation. He gathers his things and stands. But Tom follows him, grabbing his wrist, tugging him to a standstill.

“I am sorry,” Tom says. “I truly am, Harry. For all of it. Please, tell me how I can—”

“He has photos of me,” Harry says, and Tom falls silent. “Pictures from, from when we—one of the times that we,” Harry fumbles with his words, his voice shaking. “I can’t remember exactly when. I didn’t want to, I told him I didn’t want to but I was—” Harry pauses and thinks of the journal, of other-Harry’s shameful desperation, and the vindictive smile on Theo’s face as he described that night to Harry. “I wasn’t thinking straight. I said no, but he kept asking, and so then… I said yes, I suppose. And so he took them. The photos, I mean. I don’t know how many. I haven’t seen them. But he has no reason to keep them hidden for my sake any longer. Not after what I did to him. So I’m guessing he’s sent them to you, or maybe to my parents, or maybe he’s going to mail them to the Daily Prophet so everyone in the world can get another glimpse of how much of a fucking whore I am.”

“Enough,” Tom snarls suddenly. He tugs Harry closer. Harry stumbles forward into Tom’s chest, and Tom wraps his arms around him.

“Why?” Harry asks, his face muffled by Tom’s shirt. “It’s true.”

“There are many things that you are,” Tom says. He sounds angry again so Harry tenses, waits to be berated, or insulted, and is stunned to silence when Tom continues on to say, “you are smart, witty, and effortlessly kind. You are brave and stubborn as a mule, enough to drive me mad sometimes—”

Harry huffs out a laugh, feeling his face flush, and Tom chuckles alongside him.

“You are beautiful,” Tom adds quietly. He runs his fingers through Harry’s curls again. “I am lucky to call you mine.”

Harry’s breath stutters. His knees feel terribly weak for just a moment, and his heartbeat flutters, and all of his apprehension melts away into nothing.

“Do you understand?” Tom asks.

Harry hesitates. “You haven’t seen them, then,” he says, evading the question. “The photos.”

“No, I have not,” Tom says. He sounds endlessly patient. “But that does not matter, Harry. *You* are what matters to me.”

“You might change your mind when you see them.”

“Shan’t.”

Harry smiles. He looks up at Tom, who is looking down at him with an all-suffering expression. “So…” Harry says. “You’re not upset about that, then, I suppose. Not yet at

least."

"No," Tom says. "I am not."

"Then what is it? There must be something. You've been acting strange these past few days."

Tom sighs. His mouth twitches. His eyes go dark again, just for a flash of an instant, and then he shakes his head. "It is nothing, darling," he says. "A… personal issue I am working through that I do not wish to trouble you with."

"A personal issue," Harry deadpans.

Tom's mouth twitches again. He gazes hard at Harry, searchingly, his eyes lingering on Harry's lips, and—when he speaks again, it is in Parseltongue. *Shall we go inside?* he hisses smoothly.

Harry opens his mouth, and Tom's gaze narrows in like a hawk.

Yes, Azim says, his own lilting hiss traveling up from where he is still coiled around Harry's ankle. *Let us retire indoors where it is cooler.*

Very well, Tom says after a long pause, his eyes still fixed on Harry's mouth.

Harry shifts uneasily. He lowers his gaze and steps back, his bare feet pressing into the warm grass. "You won't tell me, then," he finally says when Tom is still silent. "That's fine. Whatever. Just don't come crying to me when your husband is starkers on the front page of the Prophet getting buggered by another man."

"Alright," Tom says. He sounds amused. "You have a deal."

"Fine," Harry says. His eyes dart up then, risking contact with Tom's, who is now smiling, his lips red and tempting. Harry swallows hard and clears his throat. "Well, let's go inside then."

Tom offers his arm without another word, and Harry takes it.

-

Things continue on in the same manner. Harry makes his peace with it, after another few days pass and Tom still won't say why he's acting strange. He doesn't seem to be angry, at least,

and he seems even more affectionate than usual, always finding an excuse to touch Harry or hold him or play with his hair. And so Harry thinks that whatever it is, it can't be one of his *big* secrets, the ones he's managed to keep since he woke up in this world. He thinks that if Tom had somehow found out that Harry was an imposter, he wouldn't be treating him so kindly. He probably would have had him thrown in a cell by now to be interrogated by the aurors. Or maybe he would have forced his way into Harry's mind, just to see the truth for himself.

But he hasn't done any of those things. And he makes Harry's heart flutter so much with the sweet things he says, and the gentle way he touches Harry, that Harry forgets to be afraid. For the first time since he took the other-Harry's place, he starts to feel like this world could be his home.

And so he starts to let down his guard.

-

Your stomach is making that disgusting sound again. Will you eat soon? Azim asks.

Harry, not paying attention, his eyes fixed as always on his sketchbook and his feet stretched cozily toward the fireplace, thinks nothing of responding. He forgets that he's not alone. He's in the library and Tom is sat right beside him on the sofa, and Azim is coiled on his other side, the end of his scaly body draped over Harry's thigh. Harry forgets the one thing he was never supposed to forget.

No, I'm not hungry, he hisses.

And—it takes him a minute. Longer than it should. He keeps sketching, squinting at the parchment, his hand curled around the charcoal pencil.

It's getting harder to draw things from memory. He's thinking about that day in third year, in the Shrieking Shack, when Sirius and Professor Lupin had been reunited and Pettigrew had been revealed as the spy. Harry remembers the vindictive fire in Professor Lupin's eyes. He remembers his ratty sweater, and his scuffed brown shoes, and the way his trousers had been belted tightly over his narrow hips. But he cannot remember what the correct angle of his jawline was. He cannot remember how many buttons had been on the sweater, or whether Professor Lupin's eyes had been a dark brown or more of a soft hazel, or whether his jaw had

been more rounded or square. There are many things like that, small details here and there, that Harry finds himself struggling to recall, the longer he stays in this world. He's not sure how he feels about it.

Are you certain, my love? Tom hisses carefully after a very long silence wherein Harry is still not paying attention.

Yes, it's fine. Just go and have something without me, I'll come down later, Harry says, feeling a bit annoyed.

Are you absolutely certain? Tom asks again.

Harry opens his mouth to retort and then freezes. He very slowly raises his eyes to meet Tom's.

Tom is staring. His eyes are wide, pupils blown out, lips slightly parted, and there is a wildness to his expression that Harry has never seen before. And one corner of his mouth is turned up just so, like—he is not surprised at all, like he had already known Harry could speak to snakes this whole time and he was only waiting for him to slip up.

Hello speaker, Tom hisses.

Harry scrambles off the sofa. His sketchbook goes flying, Azim slipping off his lap and letting out an alarmed hiss. Harry trips over the edge of the rug and goes sprawling to his hands and knees. Terrified, he flips around to see that Tom is also up and is advancing toward him. His robes are fluttering, his gaze narrowed and Harry's vision goes white. He clambers back up to his feet. He tries to speak, to apologize, or call for help, or say *something,* but he's so overwhelmed that his words come out in a mangled mix of Parseltongue and English that only makes matters worse.

"I was—" [*please, no, I* —] "I'm sorry, Tom—" [*don't* —]

Tom doesn't respond, although his hands twitch and jerk at each instance of Parseltongue. He seems purely fixated on one thing and one thing only, which is to get closer to Harry, who is still scrambling away from him. Harry's heart is in his throat. He pulls out his wand and trains it on Tom.

Tom's eyes glow. He does not even spare Harry's wand a glance. *You have been keeping more secrets,* he says.

Harry takes a step backward, shaking his head. "No," he chokes out. "No, Tom, I would never—"

Speak to me in the language we share.

Harry feels his face go white. He presses his lips together. He shakes his head again, and Tom's eyes darken. He advances forward and Harry staggers back, his hand shaking, wand still pointed at Tom's chest. "I'm sorry," Harry says. "I should have told you. I can explain —"

Tom ignores his protests. Harry shoots off a stunner in his panic, a jet of red light that Tom bats away like a pesky fly.

My love, Tom hisses. *This is no time for duelling.*

Harry shudders. He tries *expelliarmus* next, and then *impedimenta, everte statum,* and Tom only seems faintly amused. So Harry keeps trying. He casts more and more, spells he had been too afraid to reveal during their mock-duels but which now jump out of his wand from some long-buried instinct, a remnant of his past life where duelling was an everyday activity and Death Eaters walked every corner of the wizarding world. Harry no longer has the time or wherewithal to keep up his clueless act. It does not matter, anyway—Tom doesn't even seem to notice. He deflects Harry's attempts with an ease that is disconcerting. He is clearly not playing anymore—he is more like a hungry panther, eyes narrowed, the muscles of his body lithe and coiled for action.

"Stop," Harry says, his chest heaving, his eyes darting around the room. The door out of the library is only a few paces away, but he doesn't think he would make it. And he doesn't want to turn his back on Tom, or lower his wand. "Stop, please, just wait," he says.

I have done my waiting, Tom hisses.

Levicorpus, Harry thinks desperately with a flick of his wand when Tom takes another step closer. The spell doesn't land but Tom's eyes sharpen, and he watches the pale green jet of light as it coasts past him. He suddenly seems even more curious. His eyes turn back to Harry and he smiles. "You have been holding back," he says quietly.

"No, I—"

Do not deny it.

Harry flinches. He takes one more step back and trips again, his foot catching on uneven flooring, and he sprawls backward onto his arse. His wand goes flying out of his grip and clatters embarrassingly loud on the wood floor somewhere behind him. And Tom—

He drops down to his knees, and then—

He *crawls* to Harry.

Harry might even say that he *slithered,* that he moved across the floor faster than should have been *possible* for a human, for a *wizard* even, but—he doesn't think about that until far later. He can't think of *anything* now, not with his pulse rabbiting and his wand so inconveniently out of reach. He tries to squirm away but there is no time before Tom is on him. He grasps Harry's wrists and presses them to the floor over his head. Harry tries to throw him off, bucking his hips in vain, his eyes wild and his breath stuttering, chest heaving, but Tom doesn't let up. He waits just like that, his weight draped over Harry, one knee resting on either side of his hips until Harry finally stops struggling.

Why do you run from me? Tom says then.

Harry stares up at his husband uncomprehendingly. (He does not think that saying *"I'm afraid you're going to kill me"* would go over very well.) Tom shifts his grip so that he is holding both of Harry's wrists in one hand. The other, he winds carefully through Harry's curls and tugs until his head is tilted back, the column of his throat exposed.

"Ngh—"

"Shh. It's alright," Tom murmurs, his tone soothing but his eyes dark with hunger. Harry's mind blanks with fear. He lets out a terrified mewling sound (one he will be terribly embarrassed about later, after everything is over and he's had time to think about what happened) and tries once more to squirm out of Tom's grip, but Tom hisses a sharp warning in Parseltongue and Harry goes limp. He waits for the pain that is certain to follow. For a hand that squeezes too hard, for words that bite and fingers that claw and tear, but—Tom handles him as tenderly as a flower that has yet to bloom. He leans in close and presses his mouth right over the crook of Harry's neck.

Harry shudders, goosebumps rising all over his body, and feels heat rushing to his cheeks. "Tom," he says, the word coming out in more of a startled whine than anything else.

Enough, Tom hisses again. He pulls back solely to fix his blown-out gaze on Harry's mouth. Harry stares up at him, his breath uneven, and he swallows hard. Tom's eyes dart down to track the movement of his throat. *Let me hear you,* he says.

"No, Tom, please just— *hnn—"*

I know you can, Tom hums, tugging a little bit harder on Harry's curls. *Will you do it for me, darling? Will you let me hear it?*

"Nn —no—"

Yes, Tom insists, sounding eternally patient. He still has both of Harry's wrists encased in one hand, pressed to the floor, but—not *too* tight. Not enough to hurt. Not even tight enough to cut off blood flow. Harry could probably break out of the grip if he really tried, if he really made an effort—but for some reason, he does not. Instead, Harry squeezes his eyes shut. He resigns himself to the fact that his husband has somehow learned one of his deepest secrets.

How did… how did you find out? he finally says in a nervous rush of hissing breath. And he thinks that this is it—Tom will certainly punish him now, for keeping such a secret. Tom will want to know what other secrets Harry has kept. He will be furious, and resentful, mistrustful, and he will revert to the way he was before, when he treated Harry like a child and restricted his every action and looked at him with disgust.

But Tom still does not punish him, despite the fact that he has Harry at his complete mercy beneath him. He does not seem in much of a hurry to answer Harry's question, either. He only makes a low, excited sound, like a groan, or a growl, and leans in close again until his breath is ghosting over Harry's skin, like he is deciding where to press his mouth next. Harry, in the meantime, holds perfectly still. He keeps his eyes squeezed tightly shut. Then Tom makes his selection. Lips press, firm and warm, right beneath Harry's ear and dragging up over the line of his jaw. Fingers tug gently at his curls. And Tom's weight over Harry's hips

settles in more heavily, possessively, more-so when Harry shivers, when he lets out a little whine and jerks his hips reflexively upward. Only then does Tom pause and pull back again. They stare at each other for a moment, faces inches apart, mouths open and panting for breath.

I heard you, Tom says into the loaded silence. He leans in to press an open-mouthed kiss to the crux of Harry's throat, speaking his next words against his skin. *You were speaking with Azim. My mate, speaking in the hallowed tongue of my ancestors as though he was born with it.* He traces his tongue down from Harry's throat into the dip of his collarbone, and Harry whimpers. He's still squirming, struggling faintly, although he really can't quite tell if he is trying to pull Tom closer or push him away.

I... I'm sorry, Harry tries in another anxious, stuttering hiss, and Tom groans again. He swears a low oath, and then—then he is sliding his hands down over Harry's chest, working at the buttons of his shirt and popping them off one by one.

And it is as though someone else is at the wheel. Someone *not* Harry's husband any longer but something wild and untamed, something with hungry, slitted eyes and scales and sharp fangs, something that is unwrapping Harry like a present. There are hands pushing aside soft fabric and trailing worshipfully over skin, over Harry's heaving chest and the lines of his ribs.

Harry does not have much an idea of what's going to happen, or how to reciprocate, because he and Ginny never really went further than kissing. The most he knows about sex, in fact, is what he overheard in the Gryffindor boys' dormitory when Seamus had gone all the way with his girlfriend over the summer and had described the entire event to all of them in excruciating detail. Harry had been flustered, and horrifyingly aroused, and he had been so busy watching Seamus's mouth saying words like 'cock' and 'cunt' and 'slick' that he had forgotten to actually take in the important details of the story and learn something from it. (Then there had been that one time during sixth year of course, in the locker room after quidditch practice with Ginny, but Harry had been so nervous that after a few minutes the redhead had laughed fondly, ruffled Harry's curls and squeezed his shoulder and had said *"it's alright Haz, I don't think I'm ready either,"* and they had never had another chance after that before Dumbledore died and Harry left on his horcrux hunt.)

Look at me.

Harry's eyes snap open. Tom is looming above him, his mouth twisted in frustration, and his eyes flash red like he can tell that Harry's mind has drifted somewhere far away. Harry cringes. He tries to lower his gaze, but Tom curls a hand under his chin and raises it so their eyes meet again.

I will make you sing, Tom promises fervently. *I will hear the way you sound when you are in the throes of pleasure by my hand, and my hand alone. It is my name you will call out, over and over, and I will swallow your songs until we are as one.*

Harry's eyes go half-lidded. His lips part, and his hands flex where they are still bound in Tom's grip. He's embarrassingly hard, (has been since Tom climbed on top of him and pinned his wrists to the floor, which is something Harry will have to unpack later) and he works his

hips again, rubbing up against Tom, and his face feels hot. “Please,” he says, his voice little more than a helpless, overwhelmed squeak, and Tom’s visage darkens. He leans in and finally, decisively, slants his lips right over Harry’s.

And—Harry has not been kissed like *this* before.

He makes a muffled sound, a little —*hhhng*— and Tom swallows it right up. He licks into Harry’s mouth like a starved animal, teeth clashing and Harry can hardly breath, let *alone* protest, although he does not think he would even if he could. His fear has been superseded by the needy, aching warmth in his cock and the goose pimples rising all over his skin and the way it feels just right to have every inch of their bodies pressed together. He wants more, needs more, and so he lifts and hooks one leg around Tom's hip.

Please, he says, in more of a needy warble than a hiss, and Tom seems to understand what he needs, even when Harry himself does not. He releases his grip on Harry’s wrists. Harry feels briefly unmoored. He panics, his hands scrambling for grip on something and he reaches one up to tug at Tom’s hair (which is something he has never had the courage to do before). Tom makes a guttural sound at the feeling. Harry gasps, and tugs harder, and is rewarded with the sharp threat of teeth nipping at the top of his ear.

“Hn— Tom, please,” Harry says again, panting, squirming, close to tears, his mind a whirling, shifting mass of arousal and fear.

It’s hot, lying so close to the fireplace and with Tom draped all over him, and so Harry is glad when Tom is able to pause his frenzied movements long enough to tug Harry’s shirt the rest of the way off. He flings it somewhere behind them. Then he sits back on his heels, his gaze roving over Harry’s exposed, sweat-streaked skin, his eyes burning like molten lava. His mouth looks invitingly red and wet. Harry wants to feel it on his skin again. He wants Tom to leave mouth-bruises all over the parts of him that have never been touched. He wants to ache from it. He wants to feel the indent of Tom’s fingertips in his hips and around his ribcage and his neck and he wants the marks to never fade. “C’mon... please,” he says, shivering, reaching out to try and pull Tom back down to him, to press their mouths together.

Tom resists. *You know what it is that I want,* he hisses.

“I don’t,” Harry denies breathlessly. He stares wide-eyed up at Tom, who is gazing down at him with an almost pleading look in his eye.

“Give me this, husband,” Tom murmurs. He shifts, his hips dragging over Harry’s again, and Harry lets out a strangled sound of pleasure. Tom lapses back into Parseltongue. *Give me what you have denied me. What you have kept hidden. Let me hear you. That is all I ask.* He leans in close. He presses another wet kiss to the column of Harry’s throat.

Don’t stop, Harry begs in the next instant, the Parseltongue spilling obediently from his lips. His head falls back and knocks into the floor with a thunk. He feels dizzy. *Please don’t stop.*

Tom keeps going as bidden, his lips dragging hotly over Harry’s skin until their lips meet again. Harry’s mind is blank. He’s forgotten why he should be terrified, or why he shouldn’t be speaking Parseltongue, or why he shouldn’t be allowing Tom to touch him like this. All he

knows is that he wants more of this feeling. He wants to be swallowed up. He wants to sink into the blissful pleasure of it and never return.

You are not the man I married, Tom hisses, in a breath between kisses. *But you are mine all the same. Are you not?*

Yes, Harry responds, his eyes glassy, his body trembling. He doesn't really register Tom's words. *Yes, yours. I am yours.*

Tom groans. He presses his weight further onto Harry and rolls his hips forward, heavy and hard, and Harry gasps. He hitches his leg even higher up on Tom's waist. He tugs fruitlessly at his husband's shirt, then, pawing at the buttons, wanting to feel the warmth of their bodies pressed together with no barriers between them.

Tell me what else you have kept secret from me, Tom hisses then, raving at this point, not paying much attention to what he is saying. He sucks at a sensitive spot on Harry's shoulder that will surely bruise. Harry whines and arches into it. *I would know you inside and out. Let down the barriers of your mind and show me who you really are.*

It takes Harry a minute to process. Then he falters. His body tenses up and he tilts his head to the side, his eyes catching on the low flames flickering in the fireplace. He feels suddenly sick. "What?" he mumbles.

He is short of breath, near hyperventilating, and he can feel how red his cheeks are and how the blush has spread down his neck and over his bare chest. He turns his head and looks back up at Tom, who is staring down at him and seems only half-lucid.

"Harry," Tom says with a sigh when their eyes meet. He presses closer, tries to fit their mouths together, but Harry jerks his head away. He presses a palm to Tom's chest and pushes.

Tom shudders. "Harry," he says again, lapsing into an urgent hiss. *Lie back, please... let me take care of you, let me—*

"Stop," Harry pleads.

Tom flinches. He's frozen in place now, his chest rising and falling rapidly.

"Get off," Harry says, his voice cracking He pushes at Tom's chest again. "Stop. Get off me."

Tom sits up. "Harry," he says yet again. He sits back on his heels and scrubs a hand over his face and then through his hair. He looks around the library like he has just woken from a very confusing dream. "I… are you alright?"

"No," Harry says. He feels suddenly furious, although he's not sure why, and he's still breathing heavily, and his cock is still so hard it's practically painful pushing up against his trousers. He sits up and scoots away. "No, I'm not."

“Harry,” Tom says, and Harry grits his teeth. He doesn’t know why Tom keeps saying his name like that, like a prayer, and why it’s affecting Harry so. “Harry, please—let me—I am sorry. I don’t know how this— I didn’t mean for things to go this far... I lost control. Come here. Let me… let me hold you, that is all,” Tom pleads. “Come back here to me, let me—”

“What did you say?” Harry interrupts him, scooting back even further although it aches to do so, when all he would really rather do is throw himself back into Tom’s arms and be ravished on the plush rug on the floor of their library. “Just then. What did you say?”

“What did I,” Tom hesitates. His face is pale, and his mouth trembling. “I said… a lot of things, darling. What—when—”

“You said,” Harry interrupts again, his voice shaky, “you said— ‘you are not the man I married.’”

Tom’s face twists. He seems taken aback, startled, and then a bit nervous. “Yes,” he says slowly. “I suppose I did.”

Harry stares at Tom in disbelief. “What—why would you say that?”

“I…” Tom hesitates. He tries to shift closer to Harry, but Harry doesn’t allow it. He moves back again. “You are a Parselmouth, my love,” Tom says gently, like that explains everything.

“Okay?” Harry frowns. “And… you know that because— because *why?* You were spying on me? Listening in?”

“I— it was not— *spying,* no, that was not my intention, I simply—”

“You said you trusted me.”

Harry is shaking now, and not like he was moments before when Tom’s hands and mouth were all over him. No—all of the pleasure has gone, and all of the delicious, hot sensations are no more. Now he’s only frightened, and he feels lightheaded, his vision swimming. He pushes himself further away again, sliding entirely off the soft rug and onto the hardwood floor. “You promised.”

Tom stares at Harry helplessly. “I do trust you,” he says.

Harry scoffs. "Yeah, right."

“Or at least I am trying to, which is more than I can say for you,” Tom adds, his face contorting. “How could you keep something like *this* from me, Harry? Parseltongue?”

Harry flinches. “It doesn’t matter,” he says stubbornly, his eyes now darting around the room to locate his wand. “You still shouldn’t have—”

“It is an *ancient language,”* Tom hisses. His face is going red. “Out of the entire wizarding world, there is one living wizard who is known to speak it. *One wizard,* Harry. *Me.* ”

“Who cares?!”

“I care!”

Harry blanches. He cannot remember the last time his husband shouted at him. It was a long time ago, surely, months and months now—perhaps not since the night that he pulled Harry from the edge of the roof. Harry does not like how it feels. He does not like how much it still frightens him.

Tom grimaces at Harry’s reaction. When he speaks again, he has lowered his voice into something far less intimidating. “I care,” he repeats gently and fervently. “This means something, Harry. You… you *know* it means something. That’s why you have kept it from me. It must be why you have been studying Occlumency in secret. There are things you are hiding from me that are more than—more than a sordid love affair. More than a traumatic childhood. Aren’t there?”

Harry gapes at him. “How did you… how did you know what I was studying? You… you were in my room? You went through my things?” Harry’s chest suddenly feels tight. He rubs one hand over his sternum, humiliated to feel tears prickling at the corners of his eyes.

Tom’s breath catches. His eyes look oddly glassy, and he presses his lips together. He seems panicked. “No, I—”

“You did. You must have. And then instead of saying anything, you just fucking—” Harry makes an angry sound and climbs to his feet, tugging at his hair. “You tricked me. You tricked me into speaking Parseltongue just so you could prove you were right. And then you thought, what? You thought I’d let you fuck me and then we’d hiss to each other like happy little snakes and our marriage would be fixed? Is that really what you thought? You thought I’d be that easy?”

“No. Harry, *no.* ” Tom sounds anguished. *“* That is not at all—”

“Why didn’t you just *talk* to me?” Harry turns away when the tears spill over, when they start to slide down his cheeks. He hunts for his shirt on the floor, and then, grabbing that, finally spots his wand a few feet away. He bends down and grabs it, shoving it in the back pocket of his trousers and then tries to storm out of the library, but he is jerked to a standstill when Tom’s hand wraps around his elbow.

“Let go,” Harry says through gritted teeth.

“How was I supposed to talk to you?” Tom pleads, sounding equal parts furious and heartbroken. “When would I have brought something like that up? Would you have preferred to discuss it over afternoon tea? In between talks of your parents, perhaps? Or what happened with Nott? Maybe in the early hours of the morning, after one of your nightmares that leaves you soaked in sweat and trembling like you’ve just witnessed a murder?”

A shudder wracks through Harry’s entire body. “Don’t,” he croaks.

“You won’t talk to me about *anything,”* Tom says. “I know your parents hurt you but you won’t tell me how. I know your relationship with Nott was not as consensual as it seemed on paper. I know that there are dark things in your mind that only come to you in dreams, when

you wake up screaming and are frightened enough to let me hold you—but even *then* you won't say a word about what happened or why. And… I know that the man I married would not have gone willingly within *twenty feet* of a snake, even one made of precious metals and jewels. And I have been a fool to be so blind to all of these things and to wait so long before confronting you. So please, tell me *something,* Harry. I am begging you. Help me to understand. Do not leave me in the dark any longer. Do not suffer in silence."

Harry lets out a choked sob. "Let go," he says, tugging again, and Tom lets him go. Harry staggers back a few feet.

"Harry—"

"I can't tell you," Harry says, his voice thick. "Why don't you understand that? Why can't you accept it? Why do you even care? You hated me. You were perfectly fine just letting me rot. What changed?"

"You did," Tom says, staring at Harry with an odd look on his face, like he has only just realised it himself. His eyes flash yellow-gold in the light of the fireplace. "You did, Harry. *You* changed. You… you are not him. Not the Harry I once knew. You have not been him for some time. No, you… you are something else."

Harry stops breathing entirely. He takes another stumbling step back and knocks into one of the bookshelves, sending multiple heavy tomes thudding to the floor. He stares at Tom with wide, horrified eyes.

"Bitsy," he says faintly, feeling numb.

The house elf pops into place beside him. "Master Harry?"

"Get me out of here," he says.

"No," Tom says immediately, his face palling in horror. "Harry, please, wait." He stretches out one hand toward Harry, and Harry ducks away.

"Out of here, to be going where, Master Harry?" Bitsy asks cautiously, looking up at Harry's tear-streaked face. "And will Master Riddle be coming?"

"Grimmauld Place, please," Harry says, looking down at her, scrubbing a shaking hand over his face.

"And… Master Riddle?" Bitsy asks again, reaching up and curling her hand around his elbow.

Harry clenches his jaw and shakes his head.

"Harry," Tom says. He looks stricken. "Please, do not do this—"

"I have to," Harry forces out.

“No,” Tom begs. He takes a few steps closer to Harry seemingly without realising. “I am sorry— I shouldn’t have done it. Stay here, and, and—we can pretend it didn’t happen, any of it. I won’t push you. I won’t make you talk. Just— just stay here. Please don’t go. We can’t— we can’t leave things like this. You cannot—”

“You said I’m not a prisoner,” Harry says, his voice going hoarse. He steps back again, stumbling, as Tom comes closer.

“Of course not,” Tom breathes. “Harry, that is—”

“Then— I’m sorry, but I’m going. I have to go. Let me go, Tom.”

Tom comes to a halt, although his hands are twitching, a muscle in his jaw pulsing, and he has a wild look in his eye like he’s considering what the consequences would be were he to try and force Harry to stay. (Harry takes another step back just to be safe.)

“What about Master Harry’s things?” Bitsy asks, her tone wheedling, like she is trying to buy Tom some time. “His soft sweaters, and his perfumes, and his lotions, and his—”

“I’ll get them later,” Harry says.

“But—”

“Now, Bitsy, please,” Harry says, his voice cracking, hot tears spilling down his cheeks. “Take me there now, or… if you won’t, I’ll call Ron and he’ll take me.”

Bitsy makes an offended sound. “Bitsy will do it,” she says, tightening her grip around his arm. “She is taking Master Harry to the House of Black, even if she is thinking he should be staying here and talking until he is not crying anymore—”

“Bitsy!”

Bitsy glares balefully at him. “Alright! Master Harry must hold on tight and not let go.”

Harry braces himself. In the last moment before they pop out of existence, Harry makes eye contact with Tom. He can’t really interpret the complicated look in his husband’s eye. Not until much later, after he’s settled into Sirius’s room and has had enough time to calm down and think about what just happened. The look in Tom’s eye wasn’t anger, or fear, or suspicion. It wasn’t even merely sadness. It was a look of pure, hopeless devastation.

Chapter End Notes

TWs:
-discussion of blackmail / photos taken during sex without consent (not by Tom)
-some dub-con sexual content between Tom/Harry

More details:
Harry speaks parseltongue in front of Tom and then in the ensuing confrontation, Tom pins Harry to the floor and there is some very heated dub-con touching and kissing between them. Tom loses himself a bit and doesn't realise how frightened Harry is/how aggressive he's being. Harry is mainly scared and confused because he assumes Tom is going to punish him for lying. They go as far as Tom removing Harry's shirt, before Harry finds out that Tom has been snooping through his things and he storms out.

Next time:
“You—you’re back?”
“I’m back,” Sirius confirms, the corner of his mouth twitching.
“You… didn’t write,” Harry says. “You said you’d owl me.”

Chapter 20: 20

Chapter Summary

The one where Tom makes a list, Harry makes toast, and Sirius makes his grand entrance

Chapter Notes

Hiii hello
Pls accept this 12k word monster of a chapter as my sincere apology for not updating sooner <3 TWs in endnote

This story has changed so much since I started it that most of the final chapters are now being written from scratch. I have my outline, and I know how it will end, but it's just the getting there that's a bit rough hahaha. Thanks for all of your patience! Bear with me and we'll get there eventually!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dear Sirius,

Harry writes, the day after he arrives at Grimmauld place, after he's spent one sleepless night curled up in Sirius's bed and then has stumbled down the stairs to see other-Harry's owl (not Hedwig, he reminds himself) perched on the windowsill of the kitchen. He pets gently over its feathers with his free hand as he writes.

I hope you don't mind me crashing at yours for a bit. I didn't know where else to go. Tom and I got in a fight, a bad one, and I had to get out of there. I'm alright. It's just—I don't know when I'll be ready to go back home. ~~And I miss him already, which is probably the most confusing part of this whole mess.~~

I suppose you'll be arriving in London soon…? It'll be great to see you. I'd love to go flying. You're right—it has been ages. Some fresh air would probably do me good.

And… I am sorry for what happened at my wedding. I know you meant well. You were probably right… I shouldn't have married him. I see that now although I don't think it's by any fault of his own. Tom does alright by me. He has been trying his hardest, and… for a while, I thought maybe things could work out. He's kind, and smart, and he treats me well (even when I don't deserve it). I think he is actually a genuinely good person. (I wish it hadn't taken me so long to realise that.) But— he is who he is, and I am what I

am, and—some problems are just insurmountable. ~~I think maybe it's me that's the problem.~~

A loud *crack* echoes through the silent room and Harry cringes, his quill clattering onto the desk. He glares at the wrinkly old house-elf who has just apparated into place beside him. "Stop doing that, you berk," he complains, rubbing his ears. "I've been here for one day and you've already burst my eardrums."

Kreacher scowls at him. "Kreacher will not apologize for disturbing the young Master Potter. Master Potter is disturbing Kreacher. He is not writing ahead to announce his arrival, and now he is sleeping in Lord Black's chambers instead of his own, which have been carefully maintained by the House of Black since Master Potter was a young wizard."

Harry winces. "Look, I'm sorry. It's just— could you not call me that? I asked you very nicely—"

"Kreacher will call Master Potter by his wizarding family name, which he was given at birth," Kreacher says nastily, folding his arms over his chest. "Master Potter thinks he can make demands of Kreacher but he is finding that he cannot."

Harry sighs. "It's not a demand. I'd just prefer it if you called me Harry."

"Kreacher *does not care* what Master Potter prefers."

Harry grits his teeth.

He had not even thought about it when he arrived at Grimmauld Place the evening before, his vision blurry with tears and his hands shaking. He had entered the building and trudged straight up the stairs, down the hallway and into the room that had always been the most familiar to him. And although it was certainly not the same room, and looked very un-lived in, a thick layer of dust over every inch of the place, Harry had felt comforted. He had collapsed onto the bed and buried himself under the blankets that smelled faintly of dogs and of cigarette smoke and of spilt wine, and his heart rate had finally begun to return to normal.

"Call me what you want, then. But I'm staying in Sirius's room," he says firmly.

Kreacher's brow furrows. He looks for a moment as if he is contemplating strangling Harry to death, but he merely scoffs and then apparates away, the *crack* resounding even more loudly than before. Harry rolls his eyes and picks up his quill to resume his letter.

Anyway—I'll see you when you get here, I suppose? Whenever that is? Kreacher says 'Lord Black comes and goes by the whims of his own self and Kreacher is not his keeper,' which I took to mean he has no idea where you are or when you might return. (He's being a huge arsehole, which I'm sure will come as no surprise to you.)

Safe travels,

-H

Harry reads over the letter a dozen times before carefully rolling it up and tying it to ~~Hedwig~~ Bernadette's leg. "Can you take it to Sirius, please?" he asks, and the owl hoots, pecking at his fingers affectionately and then flying out the window.

-

"It's only a bit of toast," Harry says plaintively to Kreacher the following morning.

"Young Master Potter is serving himself, when it is being Kreacher's job," Kreacher grumbles, glaring balefully up at Harry. "Lord Black was very direct in his instructions should Master Potter ever deign to grace his presence upon the house."

Harry snorts. He spreads a thick layer of margarine over the toasted bread and then reaches up into the cupboard, feeling around for the cinnamon shaker. He dusts it generously over the entire plate. "I've been here before, though," he says, and then hesitates, "haven't I?"

Kreacher eyes him suspiciously. "Master Potter has not returned to the House of Black since he was a small, petulant, filthy, spoiled child," he says with a sniff. "Now he has finally returned and he is acting strange. He is rummaging about in the pantry like a peasant. Master Potter should know better than to act this way. He embarrasses himself and puts shame on Lord Black."

"Sirius really says I'm not allowed to make toast?" Harry says skeptically.

"Lord Black is telling Kreacher that he must pamper the pompous Potter heir and spoil him rotten like he is accustomed at Riddle Manor," Kreacher says, his lip curling. "Otherwise, Master Potter will return to his horrid husband who is more foul than handsome and who should never have married Master Potter in the first place and who is just asking for someone to break his pretty face in."

Harry snorts again. "Pompous Potter heir?" he says, raising an eyebrow. "He said that?"

Kreacher nods sagely. "Now, does Master Potter understand?"

Harry takes a big bite of the toast, his crunching echoing around the room. "Sort of, I suppose," he says, crumbs spewing everywhere, "but he's wrong. I'm not pompous. Not anymore, anyway. And it's only toast."

“It is the principle of the thing,” Kreacher says. His brows are thick and furrowed, and he continues glaring at Harry. “Does Master Potter insult the young Miss Bitsy in such a manner?”

Harry stares at Kreacher bemusedly. He would never have guessed that he would encounter a version of Kreacher who took his job so seriously. When Harry had roused this morning, when he had found his way downstairs and his stomach had rumbled, he had assumed he was doing the elf a favor by cooking breakfast for himself. “No,” he finally concedes. “Bitsy won’t let me cook. She won’t even let me in the kitchen, sometimes, if I hover too much.”

“Miss Bitsy is smart,” Kreacher says with an approving nod. “She is serving the Riddles for many, many years, as Kreacher is serving the House of Black for many more. It is unfortunate now that she is subjected to the idiotic whims of the Potter heir.”

“So you’re saying that Sirius thinks Tom is fit?” Harry asks casually, ignoring Kreacher’s jab and taking another big bite of toast.

Kreacher’s face goes blank. “Kreacher does not know the meaning of this word,” he says sulkily after a moment, like he has just searched the entire lexicon of his mind and has come up blank.

“Fit,” Harry repeats. “Like, you know. Attractive.”

“Lord Black—attracted to— *absolutely not!”* Kreacher instantly splutters, his face going red, and Harry grins.

“You said ‘more foul than handsome,’” he reminds him. “You also said ‘pretty face.’ That means Sirius fancies him. Do you think I’ve got competition?”

Kreacher’s face goes even more red, his eyes going wide and furious and he draws himself up, disappearing from the room with a very loud *crack,* taking the remains of Harry’s toast with him. Harry stares down at his empty hand in dismay for a moment and then shrugs and returns to the bread box, pulling out another slice. From somewhere in the dirty old house, he hears Kreacher let out an infuriated shriek.

-

The day after that, Harry rouses very late in the mid-morning to the faint sound of knocking at the front door of Grimmauld Place. He sits up in Sirius’s bed with a pounding headache,

half-asleep, tangled in way too many blankets and sheets. He scrubs a hand over his face and flinches when Kreacher pops directly into the room with a loud *crack.*

“Kreacher,” Harry complains, tugging one of the blankets up over his bare chest. “Stop doing that! Jesus, I told you it’s—”

“The youngest son of the House of Weasley requests tea with the Potter Heir,” Kreacher announces, fixing his beady eyes on Harry.

“The youngest…” Harry mumbles and then lets out a huge yawn. He rubs his eyes. “Er… the youngest son of… what? Who?”

“Master Potter has slept late, and must be getting out of bed this instant,” Kreacher says impatiently. He snaps his fingers and all of the blankets and sheets disappear, leaving Harry in not much but his underclothes. He gapes at the house elf in outrage.

“Kreacher,” he says through gritted teeth. “Go away! Get out!”

“Master Potter is not *Kreacher’s* master,” Kreacher reminds Harry with a haughty look. “Now, he is getting up and dressing himself or else Kreacher is sending him downstairs in nothing but his pants.”

Harry scrambles backward on the bed, his face going hot, and he holds out a pleading hand. “God, okay! Jesus Christ. I’m getting up. I’m getting up, you arsehole. Can you just give me a second?”

Kreacher squints up at him threateningly for a moment. “Master Potter is using vulgar muggle swears,” he mutters to himself. “He is having something wrong in his head, yes he is. Perhaps Kreacher will send him to Saint Mungo’s to be inspected…”

“Get out,” Harry bellows and Kreacher turns a baleful look on him before finally disappearing with a snap of his fingers.

-

You write, and write, and write, and you think that will bring your mate home, Azim hisses reproachfully on the third day of Harry’s absence. *Why do you not go to him?*

Tom grits his teeth. He scowls down at the cantankerous little snake coiled around his wrist. They are in Tom's office because it is Harry's least favorite room in the manor, so it is the one that smells the least like him, and it is the only room that Tom can stand to be in at the moment without going mad with want and worry. *I am not writing another letter,* he hisses. *I am compiling a list.*

A list? A list of what?

Tom doesn't respond. He rereads what he has written down already on the bit of parchment.

HARRY:

-Chronic nightmares — stress-induced, or perhaps an incident from childhood?

- Rooftop attempt

*-Previous affair with Nott to now — what changed ? (Was consent ever on the table?) How does this relate to the substance abuse?) *visit St. Mungo's ~~(Must make sure to kill Nott only AFTER getting answers)~~*

-Exhibits PTSD-like behaviours in everyday situations — debilitating fear of punishment, fixation on being 'good' (as opposed to previous inclinations to misbehave / rebel / purposefully draw my ire) what caused this change?

-Tolkien (?)

-The cupboard

-Dissociative episodes growing more and more frequent (Mainly triggered by my presence ? What am I doing that causes this?)

-Incident with Lord and Lady Potter

-His magic — changing ? Growing stronger (or was it always this strong? Has he always been capable of wordless / wandless casting to such a degree or is this a new development? Why would he conceal this from me?)

-Azim

- Parseltongue !

-Legilimency studies — what else is he studying in secret? What is he trying so desperately to conceal from me?

-He looks at me like I am a stranger to him

~~-He acts like he has never been touched before~~

~~-He kisses like the only lips he knows are my own~~

-How to get him back home to me ?

Tom is thinking of more to add to the list when Azim interrupts him again. *You are wasting time,* the snake hisses. *Go to him now, and apologize.*

He does not wish to see me, Tom hisses back.

Of course he did not wish to see you on that night, *when you acted a fool,* Azim says. *He would wish to see you now. He would have you in his nest. He is far more forgiving than he should be.*

I will not cross the boundary that he has so clearly set. Tom stares despondently at his list of questions that have been marching all over his mind the past few days. None of them are answerable, not really, not unless he is willing to look through Harry's things, or legilimize Lord Potter's mind, or—demand more information from Harry himself, which would *certainly* end in disaster again.

Then what will you do? Azim hisses. *Write more letters? Pine? Do you think that will bring about satisfactory results?*

Tom takes in a long, deep, calming breath.

He tells himself that he cannot eviscerate a snake, and certainly not one which his husband holds so dear. Instead, he counts slowly backwards from twenty, clenching and unclenching his fists until the violent feeling in his chest recedes (just like Dumbledore taught him, after his first week at Hogwarts when he swapped that third year's eyebrows with caterpillars). Then he stands up, pushing his chair back, and he begins to pace around the office. He glances out the window. If things had not happened the way they did, if Harry had not fled to Grimmauld Place, perhaps he would be out on the grounds now, sprawled across the blanket in the way he does, drawing in his sketchbook and falling asleep in the sun like a lazy cat. A lump rises in Tom's throat.

I will give him space, he finally says.

Azim's tongue flickers out and tastes the air. He seems annoyed again. *You think that is what he needs?*

I do not know what he needs, Tom admits. *I do not think I know him at all. Not really. Not in the ways I wish to. And not in the ways I* should, *after a year and a half of marriage.*

You do not know him because you did not want *to know him,* Azim says, coiling around and around on Tom's forearm. *Now you do, but you think it is too late.*

Tom sighs. He sinks back down into the desk chair. *Is it not?*

No.

He left me, Tom says, drumming one hand on the wooden desk. *He has never left before, not for this long at least. Any moment now, he could dissolve our marriage contract. I do not know what is stopping him.*

He cares for you.

As I care for him, Tom hisses, baring his teeth a little, *but that is not what our partnership was built on. I do not know how to—how am I to—I have never had to—I am lost.*

Go to him, Azim says again, sounding long-suffering.

No, Tom says. *Not yet. I must give him time. And I must occupy myself with something else so that I do not make another mistake that will push him further away. Even now, I wish to search his nest. To go through his things. To find out what else he is hiding.*

You hold yourself back? Azim hisses. *Why? He is not here to catch you this time.*

Tom sighs. He picks up a quill and spins it between his fingers. *I have told you why,* he says, watching the snake wind around his arm, scales catching sunlight from the window and faintly sparkling. *You do not listen.*

Neither do you. Otherwise you would have seen and understood that your mate had become a different person long ago, and we would not be having this irritating conversation.

I could also have known that if you had told me, Tom hisses. He leans forward, glaring spitefully down at the snake. *Instead, you kept your discoveries to yourself. You berate me now, but you knew something was wrong and did nothing.*

I did what I could, Azim counters, and ignores Tom's ensuing scoff. *It was out of my control. You frighten and confuse him beyond belief. He spent his days half pining after you and half hiding from your presence, reeking of fear and misery. What would you have had me do?*

Tom grits his teeth. He looks out the window again, at the empty grounds, the glittering pond, and he feels a deep well of confused heartache. *I never hurt him,* he hisses. *Or, at least… not enough for him to be so frightened of me. I admit I have made mistakes. I have not been the best mate.*

That is an understatement.

But the way he looks at me… Tom hesitates. *I would give anything to enter his mind in those moments. To see myself the way he sees me.*

Just because you did not hurt him, does not mean you did not hurt him, Azim says.

Tom rolls his eyes. He folds up his list of questions and tucks it in his robes and then reaches across the desk to pull out a fresh sheaf of parchment. *That's very unhelpful.*

If I am unhelpful, it is only because you made me so. Azim twines around Tom's wrist, circling around and around until he travels up Tom's palm.

Tom stares down at the snake on his wrist for a long time. He thinks about the way Harry had looked on the day of their wedding. The way he had stood there stiffly beside Tom, his eyes dull and lifeless, and the way his hands had shook beneath the brilliant wedding robes that had shimmered and shone under the lights. Harry had been miserable, had clearly not wanted to get married, and Tom hadn't cared enough to notice. He had seen the way Harry had flinched at the sight of Azim, and how he had shuddered with a mixture of disgust and fear when the dainty snake was placed around his neck, but Tom had only thought it vaguely amusing.

Hold on to me, he hisses to Azim, gathering his things and standing up from the desk once more. He sweeps out of the room in a rush, finally feeling a sense of purpose. Something he can do to make up for the mistakes he's made in the past. Not a fix-all, of course, but… a start. A way to show Harry that he is truly sorry.

Where are we going? Azim asks.

We have work to do, Tom says.

-

Ron's presence is the perfect counter to the anxiety that has been building in Harry's chest since he fled Riddle manor. He watches as his best friend walks all over the sitting room like he owns the place, his hands clasped behind his back, his red auror robes slung lazily over a chair. Ron bends over and inspects one of the dusty picture frames on the wall.

"Nothing happened," Harry insists again from his perch on the sofa, his knees drawn up to his chest. "I just needed some space."

"Right, right, of course," Ron says absently.

"Did he send you here to check on me?" Harry goes on, the words spilling out of him unbidden. "Because if he did, that's bollocks. I'm perfectly fine and I can take care of myself. It's bad enough he won't stop with all of the bloody letters."

"Letters?" Ron says, perking up with sudden interest. He spins around and walks back over to Harry, plopping onto the loveseat beside him.

“Yes,” Harry says grumpily. “He only writes me about a dozen a day.”

Ron’s mouth twitches. “Does he really?”

“It’s not funny,” Harry says. “You try having the minister of magic stalking you. It’s all *‘how are you feeling today, my love?’* and *‘have you been eating well, darling?’* and *‘Bitsy made this treacle tart for you,’* and *‘please write me back, just a word, just so I know you’re alright, please let me see you—’*” Harry pauses. His throat suddenly aches. He falls silent and stares down at his knees. His eyes are stinging, and he feels sick.

“That doesn’t really sound like stalking, mate,” Ron says gently, sounding sympathetic.

“I know,” Harry responds miserably.

“You want to talk about it?”

Harry fidgets on the sofa, worrying at his lower lip, and shrugs.

“Did you have a row?”

“Sort of, yeah, I suppose,” Harry says. “I just… I needed some space.”

“Right,” Ron says again, smiling wryly. “You said that.”

“I’m allowed,” Harry says then, his face getting hot, and his stomach twisting. “I am. I’m not — I wasn’t— I had to go. I had to get out of there. I couldn’t stay, not after what happened.”

All of the amusement fades from Ron’s face as Harry speaks. His eyes narrow. “Did he hurt you?” he asks sharply, scanning every inch of Harry’s frame. “Is that why you left?”

“No,” Harry blurts out instantly. He stares at Ron with wide eyes. “No, of course not.”

“You don’t have to try and protect him, mate. Even the minister of magic has to follow the law. There’s loads we could do to keep you safe. You don’t have to go back to him if you don’t want to.” Ron shifts closer on the sofa, resting a hand on Harry’s knee and squeezing comfortingly.

“No,” Harry says again. He shakes his head fervently. “He hasn’t hurt me. He has n— he has never,” Harry hesitates then, stumbling over his words a bit, and Ron’s eyes narrow further into dangerous slits. “He has never hurt me,” Harry insists. “He wouldn’t, I mean I don’t think… It’s not like that. It’s not.”

“What’s it like, then?”

Harry lets out a frustrated puff of breath. He runs one hand through his curls and shrugs. “I dunno. It’s hard to explain. There are… *things*... that he wants from me that… I can’t give him,” he says haltingly, and Ron’s face grows positively murderous. Harry cringes. “I didn’t mean—”

“And what the bloody hell is *that* supposed to mean? I don’t care that you’re husband and wife, mate, if he’s hurting you, if he’s forcing you to—”

“No,” Harry says firmly. “No, he just,” Harry pauses, swallowing hard, “he wants us to be… happy? Like… to work things out, and to be some sort of… a *real couple,* I think, and I just can’t be that for him. It will never work. I am not what he wants or needs, and I need him to understand that. And every day that I spend with him makes it harder.” Harry’s voice peters out at the end, his eyes stinging even more now. “He has this way he looks at me like… like he would do *anything* for me, like nothing else in the world matters, and it scares the shit out of me. No one’s looked at me like that before. I have never… I don’t think I deserve it. And I don’t think he knows me enough to feel that way about me. He doesn’t really know me at all, because I haven’t let him get close. I haven’t let *anyone* get close in a long time.”

Ron’s eyes soften. He throws his arm around Harry’s shoulder and pulls him close, until their heads knock together. “Alright,” he says quietly, not sounding angry anymore. “If you say so, mate. But… if he’s really not hurting you, and he wants you to be happy, and if he’s writing you all these love letters—”

“Love?” Harry interrupts in a strangled tone and Ron ignores him,

“—and if you miss him that much,”

“Miss him?!” Harry squawks out indignantly. “What makes you think—”

“—then maybe you ought to write him back,” Ron finishes with one raised eyebrow.

“I am *not* going to write him back,” Harry says sullenly. “He’ll give up, eventually. And then he can move on and find a normal husband and he’ll be happy and he won’t have to worry about me anymore.”

Ron seems skeptical. “And will you be happy, too? You think you can spend the rest of your life hiding from your feelings? Running screaming from anyone who dares to try and love you? Doesn’t sound like much of a life.”

Harry flinches. “That doesn’t matter,” he insists. “And he doesn’t— he doesn’t *love* me. He *shouldn’t* love me.”

Ron heaves a sigh and squeezes Harry close for a little longer and then lets him go. “Alright. Well, it’s your marriage, I suppose,” he says lightly, although his brow is furrowed.

“Right,” Harry says, a mulish lilt to his tone.

Ron’s mouth twitches. “Right, then… What's all this about treacle tart, anyway?”

“Hm?”

“If you’re so tired of having a loving husband that sends you care packages, maybe I’ll take it off your hands. Mum hasn’t made treacle tart in ages. How does Bitsy make it? Do you have any custard?” Ron climbs off the sofa and trots off in the general direction of the kitchen.

Harry scrambles after him. “It’s mine,” he says heatedly, suddenly feeling very possessive over the dessert that Tom had sent him the day after his arrival that Harry had initially been too upset to even look at. “You can’t have any! Bitsy made it for me. I was…. I was just saving it for—”

“I dunno,” Ron drawls, and he already sounds halfway down the hallway. “It doesn’t sound like you deserve it. Have you even eaten *anything* today? Treacle tart is for dessert, anyway —mum always said not until I’d finished my supper—”

“I— I had toast yesterday, and—it’s none of your business—”

“You won’t have the strength to fight me for it then, will you? Not if you haven’t had your protein—”

“Shut up!”

-

And so Harry finally does write a letter to Tom, four days after their horrible fight, when he’s curled up into a ball in the back of Sirius’s closet surrounded by moth-eaten coats and crumpled jumpers, trying to shake off his latest nightmare.

They’ve gotten worse while staying here in Grimmauld Place, and Harry doesn’t want to admit to himself the probable cause. He knows he’s grown used to the comfort and safety of Riddle manor. He knows that he would sleep better if he was curled up in Tom’s arms. And he knows that he’s causing Kreacher unnecessary distress because the house elf is currently stomping around Sirius’s room, threatening Harry with bodily dismemberment if he doesn’t come out of his hiding place.

“Go away,” Harry croaks feebly. He picks up one of the old jumpers and presses the fabric to his face. It smells like Sirius a little bit, and like firewhiskey, and like dust. “I’m fine, Kreacher.”

“Young masters must not sleep in closets,” Kreacher shouts, banging what sounds like one of Harry’s trainers against the door to the closet. “It is improper. They must be sleeping in beds. Come out at once, Master Potter.”

Harry hadn't meant to end up in the closet. He doesn't really even remember climbing inside. He only remembers the white hot fear, and visions shifting over his eyelids of broken headstones and fiery pain in his forearm and blinding agony in his head, and Cedric's pale, cold face, and the sibilant hiss of Voldemort's voice, his red eyes trained on Harry, and Harry had startled awake in such a panic that he had only had time to grab his wand and then stumble into the darkness of the closet.

These kinds of dreams affect him more and more now as he's grown accustomed to this world. The memories of his past life are fading ever so slowly and his present body carries no muscle memory of the things that happened to him before. Now when he wakes from these dreams it is like gasping up out of a freezing lake, one that had wrapped icy fingers around his throat and tried to keep him down in the depths. It feels like a nightmarescape, a disturbing dream world that is not real and was never real but that is haunting Harry relentlessly all the same.

"It was real," he mutters to himself. "It was real. It *is* real. It's real. It's real, it happened. His name was Cedric."

"What?" Kreacher shrieks from outside the closet. "Master Potter must speak up!"

Harry grits his teeth. He shoves aside all of the scattered coats and shoes and finally pushes the door to the closet open.

"Don't you have anything better to do?" he growls at the house elf who is glaring right back at him with his hands on his hips.

"No," Kreacher says. "Kreacher does not. Kreacher has cleared his schedule to deal with the miserable Potter heir."

Harry lets out a groan of frustration and climbs all the way out of his closet. He stumbles shakily over to Sirius's desk and picks up a spare bit of parchment. "Go away," he says, when he senses Kreacher's presence at his side.

"Kreacher will not." Kreacher hesitates for a moment then, suddenly seeming oddly reluctant. "Kreacher is thinking that Master Potter is… he is needing his— he is needing to have a—"

Harry turns and cranes his neck, staring down at Kreacher bemusedly. The house elf's struggle to express himself has some of Harry's lingering fear from his nightmare finally receding. "Yes?" he says, faintly amused. "What is it, Kreacher?"

Kreacher's ears flutter in annoyance. He glowers at Harry. "Miss Bitsy is giving Kreacher the ridiculous list of tasks to care for Master Potter after his night terrors, yes she is. She is telling Kreacher that Master Potter cannot sleep well and will not eat and is like a child, needing much assistance in his daily activities, he is not to be near windows or roofs unsupervised, he is not to be touched without permission, he is not to skip meals, he is not to—"

Harry feels a deep, embarrassed flush spread over his chest, up his neck and over his face. "No," he says quickly. "No, no, no, absolutely not, Kreacher. I'm fine. I don't need— I don't need you to bathe me. *Jesus fucking Merlin H. Christ,"* he adds under his breath. He thinks

about Bitsy following him around, the way she had watched him so closely after his failed rooftop experiment, how she would bring him his meals and stare at him with wide, tearful eyes until he took at least one bite before she popped away. Harry swallows hard and rubs at his sternum. His chest suddenly feels tight.

“Was certainly not going to bathe Master Potter,” Kreacher mutters grumpily. “Was only going to fill the tub. Was not even going to add the soapy bubbles. Kreacher will not coddle the young Potter heir as Miss Bitsy coddles him. Kreacher knows the heir is no more than a stupid, spoiled child and must learn to do these things himself. As such… Kreacher will allow Master Potter to skip one more meal before he takes drastic measures.”

“I don’t need anyone looking after me,” Harry snaps, hardly listening. “I’m fine. I’m a grown adult. Will you just go away?”

Kreacher gives him a deeply skeptical look and mutters something incomprehensible under his breath before popping out of the room.

Dear Tom,

~~*I miss sleeping next to you*~~

~~*I wish you were here*~~

~~*I wish I had never left*~~

~~*My nightmares are getting worse*~~

~~*I have to tell you something and you’re probably going to hate me or maybe you’ll kill me or maybe you’ll become an evil dark lord just like he did*~~

I’m sorry for leaving the way I did. Please don’t worry about me—I’m alright, Kreacher is here and I asked him not to let anyone else in. And Sirius will be back from Romania soon. Is Azim alright? Will you tell him I’m sorry too?

You were right about a lot of things. I haven’t been fair to you. I have lied, and have kept secrets. You deserve better. I know you wanted to talk, and I do too, I promise, but just… not yet. I need some time. I’ll owl when I can and I promise I won’t get into any trouble. Will you check on Bitsy? I think she misses me. She keeps nagging Kreacher and it’s driving him batty (and he’s driving me batty).

-H

P.S. If Theo ends up sending those photos to the press—

Harry pauses for a long moment, blinking hard. He clenches the quill very tightly in his fist.

~~*Please don’t look at them*~~

~~*Please don’t think of me differently after*~~

~~*Please*~~

Harry grimaces. He scribbles out the entire sentence and then rolls the parchment up tightly, carrying it over to Bernadette who is perched on the sill of the open window.

"To Tom, please," he says quietly.

-

An entire week passes just like that, in solitude at Grimmauld Place, before Harry sees Sirius. There is no response to his letter, no forewarning of arrival, and Harry begins to wonder if Sirius grew too busy with his work at the dragon preserve and decided to skip his trip home.

But then there is one very late evening, past midnight, when Harry has already roused twice from nightmares and has given up on sleep entirely. He is pacing the upstairs hallway, his hair wild and tangled, bare feet padding over the creaking wood floors and clad in pyjama pants and an oversized jumper he found in the back of Sirius's closet. In his hand he has a crumpled bit of parchment that holds Tom's latest letter.

Harry, it reads in infuriatingly elegant penmanship.

> *When we committed to this union, we vowed that we would not care for each other. We promised that it meant nothing beyond political gain and familial reputation.*
>
> *However—despite my best attempts—I have grown to care deeply for you. I want it to mean something, Harry. Tell me what I must do. We could leave London and the ministry behind. We could find a place far from your parents and far from everything that has hurt you. What's in the past, whatever your secrets are, it does not matter so long as we have each other. We could start anew. We could be happy.*

Harry squeezes the parchment tighter. He had tried to read the rest of the letter, but his vision had begun to swim, and his hands had been shaking too much to make out the words. It did not matter much, anyway—it would likely be similar to the rest of the letters Tom had sent since Harry fled to Grimmauld Place. Letters filled with apologies, with unanswerable questions, with promises and pleadings and declarations of heartfelt emotion. Letters that never fail to make Harry's heart thud erratically in his chest and the inside of his ribcage to flutter.

He's in the midst of unfolding the letter again, smoothing the rumples against his chest so he can try to read the rest of it, to make himself feel even more guilt-ridden, when he hears the soft sound of Grimmauld Place's front door unlatching and swooshing open.

Harry freezes.

There is a quiet sigh, and a shucking of fabric, like a leather jacket being removed. A clink of keys dropping onto the console table. Another sigh, and the muted thud of a heavy bag being dropped to the floor. Harry shifts his weight, just slightly, and the wood floor creaks beneath his feet.

"Harry?" Sirius immediately calls up loudly. "Is that you, or just Kreacher lurking about?"

Harry's eyes widen. His heart lurches. He hasn't heard Sirius's voice in a very long time. Not since that day in fifth year, when he had raced to the Department of Mysteries to save his life only to watch him fall through the veil. "Sirius?" he breathes, his tone rife with hesitance.

Sirius chuckles. "Jesus, kid. If that is you, would you come down here already?"

Harry staggers forward like his strings have been cut, rushing to the stairs and stumbling down them, nearly losing his footing. When he reaches the bottom he stops short at the sight of his godfather. In the dim lighting of the hallway, lit only by the old, dusting sconces along the walls, Harry can't make out much of his features. The scent of smoke hangs heavy in the air, trailing from the cigarette dangling between his fingers, and tingling magic settling into the house around them, warm and dangerous like dragon's breath. Then Sirius steps forward into the light, closer to Harry, and Harry falters.

(He should be used to it by now, the shock of familiarity followed by the sudden realisation that the person he is looking at is not at all who he remembers them as.)

"Hey there, kid," Sirius says. His mouth twists into a wry smile, his eyes are guarded, and—

He's so *young.* Startlingly young. He looks like he couldn't be much older than Harry himself. Harry gawks at his godfather with wide eyes.

This Sirius does not look like he spent twelve years in Azkaban. There are no faded prison runes tattooed across his collarbone or his knuckles, and no dark bags beneath his eyes, although his skin is not entirely unblemished; there are, here and there, deep burning slashes and pockmarks along his arms, which Harry supposes must be from the dragon preserve. Sirius's hair is healthy, smooth and glossy, black as midnight, wavy curls spiralling everywhere (much like Harry's own curls) and tumbling messily down past his shoulders. A few strands are tucked behind his ears almost haphazardly, like he couldn't have been bothered to take a look in the mirror at himself for long enough to notice.

"Forgot what I looked like, did you?" Sirius says when he catches Harry staring. "I didn't think it had been *that* long."

"Sirius," Harry says again, his tone strangled, and he takes a step back. He bumps into the bottom of the stairs and loses his footing, sinking down and catching his weight on his palms.

This is not the Sirius that he had been hoping desperately to see. (He feels stupid to have hoped for anything different.)

“That’s my name,” Sirius drawls.

“You—you’re back?”

“I’m back,” Sirius confirms, the corner of his mouth twitching.

“You… didn’t write,” Harry says. He feels dazed. “You said you’d owl me when you reached London.”

“There wasn’t time,” Sirius says. He runs a lazy hand through his hair. “I moved up my cross-country portkey appointment right after I read your letter. Got here as fast as I could.”

Harry stares up at him slack-jawed. “You did?”

“Of course,” Sirius says.

“I— Why? You didn’t have to do that,” Harry says. His eyes dart all over the dimly-lit room, landing on everything except his godfather’s face. It hurts too much to look at him. “I told you I was fine.”

“Right… and then I applied some critical thinking skills and realised that my cousin might need me.”

“Oh,” Harry says. He stares down at his knees and tugs at a loose thread on the jumper. “Didn’t know you had any of those. Critical thinking skills, I mean.”

Sirius barks out a sharp, startled laugh. It’s abrupt enough of a sound—and so achingly familiar—that Harry jerks his head up, looking straight at Sirius and their eyes finally meet. Sirius’s smile fades a bit. His brow furrows, and he steps closer. He studies Harry’s face like a puzzle, and Harry suddenly feels nervous. He averts his gaze.

“Harry,” Sirius says, and he steps even closer, and he wraps his hand around Harry’s elbow, helping him back up to his feet. “Are you alright? You seem… different.”

“Different?” Harry repeats.

“Yes,” Sirius says, squinting at him. “A bit… odd. Peaky, maybe. And your eyes…” Sirius hesitates.

Harry tries to jerk his arm away. “I’m fine,” he says. “I told you that in my letter.”

“Right,” Sirius says, still staring curiously at Harry. His mouth curves into a half-smirk. “If you’re so fine, then why aren’t you at home with your husband right now, hm? Cozied up in his expensive bed sheets?”

Harry’s face feels hot. He grits his teeth. “I told you,” he says. “We had a row. If you don’t want me here, I’ll find somewhere else to stay.”

Sirius laughs again. “Hold on just a minute. I didn’t say that,” he says. “You know I’m only yanking your—”

“Let go of me.”

“Hey,” Sirius says, his voice a little gentler. The teasing glint goes out of his eye. He loosens his grip on Harry’s arm but doesn’t let go. “I’m sorry, kid. I was just… of course you can stay here. I’m surprised, that's all. We haven’t really got on in years, have we? Certainly not since your wedding. I suppose I’m not sure how to act around you now. My pretty, pompous, poncy little cousin.” Sirius says the last sentence very fondly, looking like he wants to ruffle Harry’s curls, although he restrains himself.

Harry swallows hard. “Well,” he finally says. “I… understand all of that. And I’m sorry to impose. I just didn’t know where else to go.” (His throat is aching, his hands trembling, eyes stinging, and he’s not sure what he’ll do if his ~~godfather~~ cousin turns him away. He’s not sure he’ll survive it.)

“It’s alright,” Sirius says, then. His eyes are searching Harry’s face again, and his expression goes soft. “Hey, it’s alright, really. C’mere.” He tugs on Harry’s arm, and Harry tips forward willingly, pressing his face into Sirius’s chest. He blinks rapidly and inhales. Sirius smells like smoke, and like dark chocolate, warm firewhisky, and he’s taller than Harry remembers, broader too. His arms encircle Harry completely and he winds his fingers up through Harry’s curls, holding him close. “It’s alright,” he murmurs again. “I’m here, kid. I’ve got you.”

Harry shudders. He holds onto Sirius for dear life, hoping against all hopes the man will not push him away, even though Harry has begun to cry and his tears are soaking into Sirius’s expensive-looking jumper. It’s impossibly soft, like cashmere, and warm, and Harry presses closer. “M’sorry,” he croaks, and then he says again, “I didn’t know where else to go.”

“You’re family,” Sirius says quietly. “It’s good that you came here. You are always welcome. Stay as long as you’d like.”

“Family?” Harry repeats, his words muffled.

“Yes,” Sirius says, squeezing Harry very tightly.

Harry takes in a shuddering breath. “I… I just wasn’t sure… after my wedding, and…”

“We’ve always fought, haven’t we?” Sirius hums, still petting his hand through Harry’s curls. “And about the stupidest things, too. That doesn’t matter. I’m here now and, well, you’re not alone. Whatever you’re dealing with, we'll tackle it together.”

Harry makes a choked sound. He inhales raggedly, pressing closer to Sirius, his knees feeling weak. More tears leak from his eyes and soak into Sirius’s jumper.

“There you go,” Sirius murmurs. “See? It’s not good to hold everything in. I’ve been telling you that for years.”

"I'm not, I'm— it's— I'm fine," Harry forces out, his voice breaking, and Sirius chuckles fondly. He shifts around a bit, keeping one arm wrapped firmly around Harry's waist and then starts to shuffle the both of them back upstairs.

"I'm sure you are," he agrees, tightening his grip when Harry stumbles. "But let's get you back into bed. Alright? It's late. Merlin knows what you were doing awake at this hour in the first place."

"Couldn't sleep," Harry admits. They make it to the top of the stairs and turn down the hallway, but— Harry digs his heels in automatically when they turn in a different direction from Sirius's bedroom.

"C'mon, then," Sirius teases, "lost your way have you? There's nothing that way but my room and a broom closet."

Harry opens his mouth and closes it. He feels his face flush bright red and he darts his eyes to the floor. "Right…" he says. "Right, of course, no, yeah…"

Sirius pauses. He turns fully and inspects Harry, his mouth curving into a shit-eating grin. "Oh, *really,"* he says.

"No," Harry starts pleadingly, but it's too late.

"The young Master Potter thought he'd take advantage of the master bedroom while I was away, hm? The guest room wasn't grand enough?"

"Shut up."

"You didn't wet the bed, did you? Tell me you didn't."

"Shut *up,* Sirius."

Sirius chuckles. He adjusts their direction and then starts guiding Harry down the hallway again, this time toward his bedroom. "You really are spoiled, you know that?" he says with a shake of his head.

"It was only… that's not why," Harry protests. "I just — I was just — I didn't have any of my things with me, and I hoped you wouldn't mind…"

Sirius hums noncommittally. He pushes open the door to his bedroom. They cross the threshold and then Harry flushes even darker when he remembers the gigantic mess of blankets and jumpers and pillows and scarves and soft shirts he had amassed on Sirius's bed throughout the week in an attempt to feel less alone.

"Er…"

Sirius surveys the mess with an extremely amused and fond expression. "Well. This is certainly… something."

"I'm sorry," Harry says miserably. "If I had known you were on your way…"

“Oh, but then I would have missed down-and-out Harry, and that would have been such a shame,” Sirius tuts. He tightens his arm around Harry’s waist and then pulls out his wand with his other hand. “You’re much more palatable like this, you know? Less sneering and scoffing and postering. You almost seem like a real person.”

Harry flinches. He opens and closes his mouth hotly. “I am a real person,” he finally says, for lack of what else to say, and feeling oddly protective of the other-Harry.

“I know that,” Sirius says. He points his wand at the bed and performs a series of complicated movements. The mess of fabric lifts into the air, ruffling and flipping and folding before settling back down into a slightly more organized spread. Then the bed itself elongates, grows wider and longer and slightly taller, and about twenty more pillows materialize and tumble haphazardly onto the mattress. “I just don’t think *you* know that,” Sirius adds, sounding faintly bitter, and Harry’s brow furrows.

“What do you mean?” he says.

Sirius doesn’t elaborate. He takes Harry by the elbow and guides him over to the bed until he is sitting up on the edge of the mattress. He points his wand directly at Harry’s face and Harry is too startled to react at all before a scroll unfurls in the air.

Sirius squints at it. “Dehydration,” he mutters. “Protein deficiency, figures. Tension headache. Sleep deprivation. Low iron. But I’m sure that’s nothing new.”

“What are you doing?” Harry asks, annoyed, and then yawns.

“Trying to figure out what in Merlin's name is wrong with you,” Sirius says. “Besides the usual issues, you know. And we can’t really fix those so it’s not worth fussing over.”

“The usual being…?”

“Stuck up, spoiled rotten, compulsive liar, sneaky conniving little rat bastard—”

“Alright,” Harry says very loudly.

Sirius’s lips twitch. He reads the rest of the report silently, with no more wise cracks. The process takes far longer than Harry would have expected. He watches carefully as the humor begins to melt out of Sirius’s eyes—his gaze darkens, and his mouth presses into a firm line, and his brow furrows.

Harry fidgets. He wonders what the list says. He wonders how far back it goes. (Then, he just tries to not think about it at all.) Finally, after an agonizing amount of time, Sirius dismisses the scroll with a flick of his fingers and turns to Harry.

“What’s my diagnosis?” Harry says weakly.

A muscle in Sirius’s jaw flexes. He opens his mouth, hesitates, and then squares his shoulders. “You need… sleep,” he says, sitting down on the bed beside Harry. “It’s late. Just —here,” he says, pressing a glass of water into Harry’s palm. “Drink that, and lie down.”

Harry is too tired to protest, really, because now that he's certain Sirius is going to let him stay, he feels the weight of the past week of pacing and stressing and thinking up worst-case scenarios completely melt away, and all of the tension in his body has lifted. He drinks the water and lets the glass get taken from his hand and then he turns and burrows beneath the mound of blankets and jumpers and socks and pyjama pants that smell like cigarette smoke and aftershave and firewhisky and home. The bed dips on the other side, and blankets shift, the lights in the room dim, and Sirius sighs. They fall into a comfortable silence.

"Are we having a slumber party?" Harry asks after a while, feeling a bit loopy.

Sirius chuckles. "Just like old times," he says. "Remember?"

"Mm."

"We'd stay up all night trading chocolate frog cards and playing gobstones, gorging on cherry tart we stole from the kitchen until our hands and mouths were stained red. Mother would scream at me in the morning when she found crumbs in the sheets."

Harry, half-asleep already, tries to picture it. His throat aches with longing. He's never had a slumber party, nor cherry tart, and he's never much liked cherries anyway but he likes the thought of it all—a universe where Sirius and Harry were just *kids*. Normal kids, the kind that played with trading cards and ate too many sweets and stayed up all night giggling and swapping secrets. Harry wonders when things shifted from slumber parties and chocolate frogs to the horribly strained relationship the two of them seem to have now. He wonders when other-Harry stopped being a kid.

"I still have all my cards," Sirius says, and then lets out a very loud, exaggerated yawn. "In a box, under the bed, I think."

"I missed you so much," Harry blurts out.

Sirius's breath stutters. He shifts a bit closer, and he hooks his arm around Harry. "Hey. I missed you too, kid," he says quietly. "I always do. You know that, right?"

Harry's eyes sting. He presses his forehead to Sirius's chest, to the soft fabric of his shirt. "I… dunno," he admits. "You were just… gone. And it's been really hard." Harry's voice dies out, and he takes in a shuddering breath.

Sirius mutters a low oath. He rubs a calming hand over Harry's back. "I know, kid. I'm sorry. I'm here now," he murmurs.

"For how long?"

"For as long as you want. As long as you need me here, I'll stay."

"Even if — even if we get in another fight, or if I do something really stupid like—"

Sirius snorts. "When are you not doing something stupid?"

Harry huffs out a shaky laugh. "You know what I mean," he says.

“Hm. I dunno. Are you going to tell me to get out of your life and never speak to you again?” Sirius asks lightly, and Harry flinches as if struck. He half-sits up.

“No,” he says, horrified. “No, I would *never—”* he breaks off and realises with a sick, pounding feeling in his chest that the other-Harry must have said it. Probably during that huge fight, the day of his wedding to Tom. “Why would I… why would I say that?”

“Hey,” Sirius says apologetically, soothingly, like he can hear Harry’s inner spiralling. He sits up as well. “It’s alright, really… it’s in the past, and—”

“I’m so sorry,” Harry chokes out.

“You were angry,” Sirius says, “and rightly so, I think. I was being a bit of an arse. I tend to do that.”

“You, you’re my g—” Harry’s throat convulses, “my cousin, my *family,* why would he—”

“Slow down,” Sirius says. He rests his hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Sirius, I just don’t understand— sometimes I just *can’t understand h— myself,”*

“Harry, take a breath, merlin—”

“I don’t know what’s *wrong* with me—” Harry says in a harsh whisper, “just sometimes I think maybe he really was—maybe I *am* what they all say I am, because why else would they have done those things? What was so… so *wrong* with me that they had to—that they felt like it was okay to—in what universe would *anyone* be driven to—”

“Harry,” Sirius says sharply. Harry falters. He blinks out into the darkness of the room and his sharp panic fades into the cool discomfort of knowing that he’s said too much. He looks up at Sirius in a panic.

“Take a breath,” Sirius orders, squeezing Harry’s shoulder firmly. “In and out.” Harry takes in a jerky breath. His eyes water. Sirius shifts his grip, and rubs his palm up and down Harry’s back in slow circles, and he waits until Harry’s heart rate has settled before he speaks again. “What are you talking about, kid? Did something… happen? Did someone hurt you? Is that why you came here?”

Harry swallows hard. “No,” he says, far too quickly.

Sirius’s face darkens. “Was it Riddle? I’ll kill him.”

“No,” Harry says, his chest tightening again. “Sirius, don’t—”

“Tell me, damnit. Who *hurt you?”*

“I can’t, I’m not— n-nobody,” Harry forces out nonsensically, trying to backtrack but somehow managing to make things even worse. “Nothing happened, and I— it was my fault anyway. I deserved it because I was bad. I’m. I’m not supposed to say anything, I’m

supposed to be good, and—" Harry's words tumble out of him in a jittery mess, his breaths hitching, his hands starting to shake.

Sirius takes a harsh breath. His grip goes slack on Harry's shoulder. *"Harry,"* he murmurs, sounding horrified. "What… who told you those things? Why are you talking like that?"

"No one," Harry says frantically, shaking his head. "Nothing. It's not. It wasn't real, and— you wouldn't believe me. Please Sirius, don't ask me—"

Sirius growls out an angry *lumos* and the room lights up enough that they can see each other's faces again. Sirius grips Harry by both shoulders and stares into his eyes. "Tell me," he demands, shaking Harry a bit.

"I can't," Harry pleads.

"Yes, you can. Trust me, kid. Just like old times. Right? I'm here now, and I need you to tell me who hurt you."

Harry swallows hard. He shakes his head. "You— you won't believe me."

"Try me."

Harry searches Sirius's eyes for any hint of malice or deceit. He cannot find any—Sirius only stares back with wide, worried eyes, his mouth twisting like he already has some idea of what Harry is going to say. But still, Harry is afraid. This isn't *his* Sirius. This man is a stranger to him, and Harry doesn't know at what point he will say too much and Sirius will grow angry and hurt him like most others in this universe have. He tries to pull away, to bolt, to scramble off the bed, but Sirius won't let go of him.

"Harry, calm down. Just tell me—"

"Why do you even care?" Harry snarls suddenly in a desperate attempt at deflection, teeth bared and snapping like a wild animal. He flashes his eyes at Sirius. "You were gone. Don't pretend to—"

"That's not fair," Sirius hisses, his face contorting. "You know why I left. You know why I couldn't stay here. Not after what happened to Reggie. This whole house, this whole goddamn city is just fucking—" Sirius's voice breaks, "it's ghosts and bad memories. That's all I can see when I'm here. So I'm sorry that I did something for myself for once, that I got out, but I asked you to come with me, and you laughed in my face."

"Nn— no, you didn't," Harry says, faltering, his face pale, and he thinks of the journal. "You didn't, or I would have — why wouldn't I have gone with you—?"

"Because you wouldn't listen," Sirius explodes. He finally lets go of Harry and climbs off the bed. He begins to pace around the room, running a hand through his hair. "You decided that marrying that pretentious prick was going to solve all your problems and you wouldn't hear a single fucking word against it. I told you it was a horrible idea. I told you you'd be miserable. I told you to get out while you still could."

“But… I didn’t want to do it,” Harry says, his voice trembling now, all of the fight drained out of him from that revelation. “I didn’t want to marry him. Couldn’t you see that?”

“Of course I could see it. I’m not blind, Harry. Why do you think we had that fight? You just couldn’t admit to yourself how big of a mistake you had made. You didn’t want to suffer the embarrassment of backing out. And you didn’t want to risk dear old daddy taking away your inheritance, even though we both know you’ve always been more miserable *with* money than without it.”

Harry flinches. He watches his godfather pacing angrily around the room, and draws his knees up to his chest. His heart aches, suddenly, and he wishes with every fibre of his being that at least one person in this godforsaken universe could have understood the other Harry.

Sirius slows to a stop and turns to Harry. He takes in Harry’s position on the bed, his hunched shoulders and ducked head, and the angry expression on his face fades. “Ah, Jesus, I’m… sorry, kid,” he says. He runs a hand through his curls. “I… I’m sorry.”

Harry looks carefully at Sirius, at the man who is his godfather but is not, in this world where everything is wrong and not right, and his mouth twists. “You’re wrong,” he says quietly, his eyes drifting down to the bedsheets, his eyes stinging. “You’re all wrong about me. You, and Tom, and mum and dad, the papers, and… Theo.”

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Sirius says again, grimacing. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Sure,” Harry says dully.

“You know… you know I can really put my foot in my mouth sometimes. I just, I worry about you. We used to be so close, and now I don’t— I don’t know how to talk to you. I don’t…”

“Because you don’t know me.”

Sirius flinches. “Harry, I’m—”

Harry looks back up then. He looks square in Sirius’s eyes. “Did you know?” he asks, his voice still just as quiet.

“Know what?”

“Did you know they were hurting me?”

Sirius freezes. He inhales a sharp breath that seems to get stuck in his throat. “What?”

“Do you know what my father does to me when I misbehave?”

“Harry,” Sirius chokes out, tortured. “What—”

Harry feels numb. The words are spilling out of him unbidden, his entire body trembling, his eyes glazed over. “The last time I was alone with them,” he says calmly, “father made me strip, and kneel, and then he hit me until I bled.”

“Harry—”

“Until my blood soaked into the carpet,” Harry says. “Then mother cleaned me up. She told me to be good, so that I wouldn’t get in trouble again, so we could be a happy family.”

Sirius’s face has gone sheet-white. He moves across the room in a lurching, unsteady gate, throws himself onto the bed, and yanks Harry into his arms. “Alright,” he says in a choked, destroyed voice. “That’s, that’s enough, Harry, don’t—” he seems at a loss for words. He pats a shaking hand over Harry’s curls.

“Did you know that?” Harry mumbles. His face has been pressed into Sirius’s chest. He doesn’t fight it. “Did I ever tell you?”

“Did you ever—” Sirius’s breathing is ragged. He clutches Harry closer. *“No,* Harry. I thought—you told me you hated them. I thought you just didn’t get along. James was always — well, he’s always been an arsehole, just like my old man but I never *once* thought that things could have gotten so—” Sirius’s voice breaks. “Why didn’t you tell me, kid?”

Harry feels himself start to shake, in Sirius’s arms. “I don’t know,” he says.

Sirius makes a rough, agonized sound, and he runs his fingers through Harry’s curls again, palm curling protectively around the nape of Harry’s neck. “Did you tell anyone else?” he begs. “Did you—does Riddle know? Is that why you married him? Tell me he knows, at least. Tell me you didn’t suffer this alone.”

Harry hesitates. “No,” he finally says. “No, he doesn’t… he knows something. But… he doesn’t really. He doesn’t know much of anything at all.”

Sirius pulls back just a bit, so he can look Harry in the eye. “Kid, I don’t—” his mouth trembles. His hands grip Harry’s shoulders. “Why didn’t you tell me? You didn’t have to agree to an arranged marriage just to— just to escape an abusive situation. I never would have—if I had known, if you had told me, we could have— I know you and I haven’t been close in years but I would have taken care of it. We could have done something, we could have gotten you out, we could have—why didn’t you just *tell* me?”

“I don’t know,” Harry says honestly. He blinks, and suddenly feels exhausted.

“How long has it been going on?” Sirius presses. “When did it start?”

“I don’t know,” Harry says yet again, his voice wavering, and his breath hitches. “I don’t know. I don’t— I can’t remember.”

Sirius opens his mouth again, probably to launch another question that shouldn’t be so hard to answer, when he looks down at Harry and he falters. Harry is bracing himself, his head ducked and his hands gripping Sirius’s shirt very tightly. He feels sort of how he felt that day in Dumbledore’s office, in fourth year, when his name had been drawn from the Triwizard Cup and all of the professors had converged on him with suspicious eyes and shouting accusations. “I’m sorry,” Harry says quietly, almost fearfully, in the silence. “I don’t— I

can't, I'm sorry. I'm sorry Sirius, I'm not—I'm not lying. I promise I'm not lying. I just can't —"

"Hey," Sirius says, his voice now achingly gentle. He folds Harry up into his arms again. "I know. I believe you, kid. It's alright."

"You believe me?" Harry repeats, mumbling against Sirius's chest.

"Of course," Sirius says.

Something deep in Harry's chest *cracks.* He starts to cry again. The tears leak from his eyes like a river and soak Sirius's shirt, and Sirius makes quiet soothing sounds the whole time, fingers working through his curls. Harry's quiet cries turn into hitching sobs, his throat aching, his eyes burning and his chest painfully tight. He can't seem to find it in himself to stop—especially not when he's wrapped up in the arms of his godfather.

(Not *his* godfather, Harry tries to remind himself, but he just *does not care,* because this is still *Sirius,* and he smells the same, and he wraps his arms around Harry just like he did in another life, so what does it matter whether this is Harry's Sirius or not? And what does it matter whether Harry is himself or if he is the other-Harry, or if they are all one and the same? Harry is here now in this world so that must make him the real Harry, and—that must make this Sirius the real Sirius, *real* and *alive* and *healthy* , not dead, not falling through a veil and not staring desperately at Harry like he is the flesh reincarnation of his father, and that's all Harry cares about anymore.)

"Why did they hurt me?" he asks between shaky sobs. "I thought, I thought parents weren't supposed to do that. Not if they love you."

"Shh," Sirius hums, his voice thick, rubbing the palm of his hand up and down Harry's back slow and steady. "Don't think about that now, kid. Just… just try and breathe."

"Is there—do you think there's something wrong with me, I mean—do you think I deserved it? Do you think—"

"There is *nothing* wrong with you," Sirius says harshly, the words scraping out of his throat like loose gravel.

"But then," Harry presses, his chest heaving, "why would they—do those things? Why did father call me," he hiccups, his breath stuttering, "a whore? Why would mother—"

Sirius swears under his breath. "Harry," he says, still running his hand up and down Harry's back. "Listen to me, kid. I don't… I don't know. But I do know this. Bad people don't always have a reason behind why they do terrible things. Sometimes they just do it because… they want to. And our family—" Sirius makes a choked sound, and clutches Harry closer. "The house of Black certainly has a history of bad people doing bad things for the thrill of it. My folks always looked down on me for sorting Gryffindor. They never hurt me, not really, but… they never really loved me, either. And after Reg died," Sirius's breath catches, "and—after I graduated from Hogwarts, I didn't have much tying me here. I couldn't stand to be around my folks. And you… you seemed alright, you know? You had your own little group by then,

you and Malfoy always getting into some kind of trouble, and… I didn't think you needed me."

"Oh," Harry says, his voice thick, wishing he remembered any of that. Wishing he weren't an imposter.

"But I'm sorry," Sirius adds in a wobbling tone, like he is trying not to cry. "I shouldn't have stayed away as long as I did, and I shouldn't have listened when you pushed me away. I shouldn't have left you at all. Because now," Sirius's breath catches, "now you're hurt, and you needed me, and I wasn't there."

"It's okay," Harry says, his throat aching, his hands clutching Sirius's shirt.

"No, it's not." Sirius sniffs and runs his palm over Harry's back again, up and down, between his shoulder blades and down the line of his spine, and Harry melts into the touch. "It's not okay," Sirius says, "but I'm here now, and you're not alone."

Harry sighs heavily. He buries his face back in Sirius's chest. "Okay," he says in a muffled tone.

"And there really is nothing wrong with you, you know," Sirius says again, like he wants to make sure Harry heard him this time.

Harry laughs weakly through his tears. "Besides… besides the usual issues, right?"

Sirius snorts out a startled laugh. "Right, but I mean it, kid. You're going to be alright. I won't let… I won't let anyone hurt you again. We'll figure this out. You can stay as long as you need."

"In your room?" Harry asks hopefully, and Sirius laughs again.

"If you want to, kid, sure. I don't mind."

Harry sighs again. He feels a huge, invisible weight lifting off his chest and shoulders. "Thank you," he mumbles.

"Don't thank me," Sirius says, the amusement gone from his tone, and now he just sounds grievous. "Why don't you just… why don't you lie down. That's it." Sirius carefully and gently coaxes Harry to relax his grip, and he presses on his shoulders until Harry lies compliantly back on the bed. Sirius tucks the blankets and sheets in around him. Finally, he smooths the palm of his hand over Harry's curls, petting gently over and over until Harry's breathing settles and his eyes drift shut. Then Sirius slumps down into the sheets himself, curling around Harry and tucking him close to his chest. He mutters a quiet *nox* and the room goes dark.

"Sirius?" Harry says sleepily after a while, his voice hoarse.

"Yeah, kid?"

“You know, you really shouldn’t… have come back.” Harry presses his face to Sirius’s chest. “You should have just… stayed in Romania. Away from me.”

“Not a chance,” Sirius hums, his words muffled against the top of Harry’s head. “Don’t try and push me away again, Harry. I won’t let you.”

“M’not worth it.”

“Yeah, you are.”

“No, because— because I—” Harry’s mind runs hazily through all of the things that have happened since he came to this world, his run-ins with Nott, the spiders, his decision on the rooftop, the white powder in the small pouch in his closet, the diary, and—his life before, the veil, and Voldemort, and Azkaban, and— “there’s more that I haven’t told you,” Harry finally croaks, “and some of it is bad, and—I have more secrets, and—I’m not even really who you think I—”

“None of that matters now. You need to sleep,” Sirius interrupts. “We’ll figure out the rest later, and whatever it is, I’ll take care of you.”

Harry heaves a long sigh. He relaxes again when Sirius starts kneading his shoulders. He closes his eyes, and shifts closer, and he listens to the quiet sounds of the room around them, the slow roll of car tires on the street outside, the early morning London traffic, and the muted chirping of nighttime crickets, the slow rasping breaths of Sirius beside him. He starts to fall asleep, finally, but he cannot quite get his thoughts to quit turning in his head.

“Sirius?” he says again.

“Yes, what is it?” Sirius hums patiently. He is still rubbing patterns into Harry’s back. The room is dark, and quiet, and Harry is warm beneath the sheets, tucked close to his godfather, and he feels safe.

“Missed you,” Harry finally breathes, forgetting that he has already said it.

“I know,” Sirius says quietly. “I know, kid. I missed you too, alright? Do you believe me?”

“Yeah, okay,” Harry says with a muted yawn.

“Then go to sleep,” Sirius says. “Don’t think so hard. I need you in tip-top shape tomorrow so we can go flying.”

“Haven’t… done that in a while,” Harry breathes.

“I know,” Sirius says, sounding faintly amused. “Too busy shopping and gossiping, hm? You think you can still fly circles around me or have you lost your touch?” he drags his fingers through Harry’s curls again, and Harry shivers.

“Dunno,” he says. “Haven’t tried getting on a broom since… since I woke up that day and Tom was angry, and… and before that there was the fire, and Malfoy was with me, and we almost…”

“Shh,” Sirius says. He adjusts the blankets around Harry, tucking them closer. “Go to sleep, kid. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Harry obediently falls silent, and he drifts off to sleep dreaming of quidditch— of the wind whistling in his ears, and the sun warm on his neck, his hands gripping the broomstick, and the ground far below him.

-

Sirius waits until Harry is fully asleep before he sends his patronus.

And on the other side of London, pacing in his study at Riddle Manor, unable to sleep, Tom watches as the large, shimmering, silvery wolf bounds toward him and opens its maw.

We need to talk, the wolf growls in Lord Black’s voice. *You’re going to tell me everything you know of what happened to my cousin. And if you had some part in it, if you are to blame at all for the condition I found him in, the pain and suffering he has endured, if you knew and you did nothing, I will tear you to pieces.*

Tom regards the wolf calmly, and then pulls out his wand.

It has been some time since he performed the patronus charm. And this time, he does not think of his conversation with Dumbledore at the end of first year, when he learned that he would never return to the orphanage. No— Tom thinks of Harry. He does not really even do it on purpose. He only thinks of warmth, and bright green eyes, and a rasping laugh, and then the memory is swelling and ballooning into every corner of his mind like a smoke bomb.

“Can we just go home now?” Harry asks quietly.

“Home?”

“Back home, to the manor.”

“Expecto Patronum,” Tom mutters. He watches the gleaming silver stream of magic burst from his wand and swell into—

Something *new.*

“Hello,” Tom says quietly, faintly stunned, but also somehow not surprised at all. He looks at the new glowing form of his patronus and feels something settle into place in his chest. It feels right. And he understands now, what has changed—not necessarily within Harry, with his books and his secrets—but what has changed within Tom himself. He feels what he had desperately wished to feel on the night of their wedding, when they had joined as wizards in union but not as anything more, and Tom had told himself that it was enough, that that was all he needed.

Tom was wrong. He needs more.

“Go to Lord Black,” he tells his patronus. “Tell him there are many who have wronged his cousin, him and myself included, and that if he wishes to know more, he must ask Harry himself. Tell him to bar Lord and Lady Potter and Theodore Nott from the house if he has not already. And tell him that if he makes my husband cry again like he did on the day of our wedding, I will cut out his throat.”

Chapter End Notes

TWs for this chapter:
-some references to past suicide attempt
-graphic description of past abuse (James and Harry)

Fun fact: I had to write about three different versions of this chapter before I was happy with it, and each one contained a wildly different Sirius with a wildly different divergence in plot. I've never written him before so this was a very fun (and extremely frustrating) experience hahaha. I know some of you were hoping that we would see the OG timeline Sirius, and part of me really wanted that for this Harry, but it just didn't end up right for the story. I have saved those alt versions of this chapter tho, and may post them at some point if anyone's interested!

Chapter 21: 21 part 1

Chapter Summary

> Harry celebrates a birthday, goes out drinking for the first time, and plays matchmaker (these are the positives).

Chapter Notes

> hi, I'm so sorry again for the wait! if its any consolation this is another long one lol 😭 ❤️ I ended up splitting chapter 21 into two parts, and this part does end on a sort-of cliffhanger? but I do hope to update with the second part fairly soon.
>
> ALSO - I have updated the work tags/ added a few new tags overall so please please check those out if you need to. (like - I guess I forgot to add the background Ron/Hermione tag so apologies if that pairing comes as a horrible shock to anyone lmao.) Things are going to get darker from this chapter onward so tread carefully and know your limits! TWs for this chapter as always will be in the endnote :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Grimmauld Place comes alive with Sirius's presence. Harry feels it in the air— the way he can breathe easier, and the way light spills in warm from the windows where it didn't before. The walls don't seem so foreboding or threatening to close in around him, and the dust and clutter and disarray of the past week melt away almost overnight.

Harry wonders if that means the House is happy to see Sirius. And then he wonders how Sirius feels, back in his childhood home with his wayward cousin, far away from the excitement of dragons.

But Sirius seems alright. He wakes early the morning following his arrival, after their long talk where Harry had revealed far more than he meant to. While Harry is still half-asleep, buried beneath the blankets on Sirius's bed, Sirius pads around the room yawning, shuffling his feet, pulling on a pair of tight jeans and scratching lazily at his back. He runs a hand through his curls.

Harry watches him with one eye cracked open. "Wheregoing?"

Sirius chuckles. He passes by the bed on his way out, and he pats his hand over Harry's head. "Need coffee," he hums. "Jetlagged."

Harry takes in a slow breath and blinks. “Jetlagged—?”

“Figure of speech,” Sirius cuts him off, sounding long-suffering. He squeezes Harry’s shoulder. “I’ll make a full pot, if you’d like a cup. Come down when you’re awake.”

“M’awake now, I am, just one minute—" Harry yawns. His eyes squeeze shut and he arches in a deep stretch, his joints cracking, and he settles back on the mattress with a heavy sigh. Sirius chuckles again. Harry listens to the sounds of him walking out of the room and quietly shutting the door behind him, and then he shuffles into a more comfortable position on the bed and promptly falls back asleep.

-

It is late in the day when Harry rouses again, his hair hopelessly tangled and standing on end and his face lined with sleep-creases. He has no idea what time it is, or how long he was out, but he feels more well-rested than he has in months. He almost lies down again, ready to sleep the entire day away, but for Kreacher’s threats to vanish all of his collected blankets and sheets and to put him out on the street in his pants.

“Come up with a new threat, why don’t you?” Harry bites at the house-elf, who glares at him.

“Master Potter will fall into a coma, yes he will, and Kreacher will do nothing to help him then,” Kreacher warns.

“A coma sounds quite nice actually,” Harry says, letting out a loud yawn and ignoring Kreacher’s enraged huff of breath. He sticks one leg in his trousers and then the other, hobbling around the room and nearly falling over. He pulls on the same jumper from last night, the one that smells like Sirius, and he runs a hand through his hair, trying to calm the staticky tangles. And then he finally makes it out of the room and down the stairs, thanks to Kreacher’s prodding, and finds Sirius sprawled over an armchair in one of the many sitting rooms. There is a cigarette dangling from his fingers and a book in his other hand opened to somewhere in the middle.

“What are you reading?” Harry asks.

“Jesus,” Sirius swears, jerking violently, the book falling out of his lap, although he somehow maintains his grip on the cigarette. He brings it to his mouth and takes a long drag before turning accusing eyes on Harry. “Only ghosts step so lightly. A bit of warning next time, kid?”

“Oh,” Harry says, faltering a bit. He finds himself suddenly struggling to find the easy camaraderie of the night before and wonders if, now that Sirius has had some time to think it all through in the light of day, maybe he’s realised that Harry’s not worth it. Maybe he’s remembering all of the bad things that other-Harry did. And maybe he’s thinking now of kicking Harry out, of sending him away—

“Ah. Jesus,” Sirius says again, although much softer this time, and takes one final drag from his cigarette before flicking it up in the air where it disappears into nothingness. He hauls himself out of the chair and moves toward Harry. He pulls him into a fierce hug. “The Sea-Wolf,” he hums after a moment, when the tension in Harry’s shoulders has dropped.

“The what?”

Sirius releases Harry from the embrace but keeps his hands on his shoulders and gives him a cursory glance up and down, focusing on the bags beneath Harry’s eyes. “Got enough sleep?”

“Er… yeah? I didn’t mean to sleep so late. Kreacher woke me up a bit ago,” Harry says, flushing, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Kreacher,” Sirius growls, and the house elf pops into the room (after a long delay that seems spiteful).

“Yes?” Kreacher simpers.

“I told you to let Harry sleep as long as he likes,” Sirius says, sounding annoyed. “Did you wake him up?”

“Kreacher needed to do the washing,” Kreacher says. He turns his eyes on Harry and sneers. “And Master Potter had enough rest. Miss Bitsy is telling Kreacher that the boy is not to lounge in bed all day and all night.”

Harry can’t help his slight flinch, the gritting of his teeth when Kreacher calls him Master Potter again, and Sirius sees it.

“What’s wrong, kid?” he asks, one hand still resting on Harry’s shoulder.

“Nothing,” Harry says quickly.

“Harry,” Sirius warns. “What did we just talk about last night? You gotta be honest with me, or we can’t—”

“It’s just… nothing, really,” Harry says.

“Master Potter has *many, many* things wrong with him,” Kreacher pipes up helpfully, grinning at Harry, and Harry flinches again.

Sirius picks it up immediately this time and turns a sharp gaze on Kreacher. “Why are you calling him that? Don’t be an arse. His name’s Harry.”

Kreacher puffs up his chest. “Master Potter is the proper—”

"Kreacher," Sirius says, his visage darkening, and the house elf gulps.

"Really, it's fine," Harry protests.

"Kreacher," Sirius says again, ignoring Harry, and his tone has shifted into something formal and unwavering. "Harry is a part of this house just as you or I am. Do you understand? You'll respect his wishes, just as you respect my own."

"Very well," Kreacher says, pouting, his large eyebrows furrowed. He glares at Harry. Harry glares back at him and sticks his tongue out. Kreacher's face goes red and he disappears from the room with a loud crack.

Sirius sighs. He lets go of Harry and bends down to pick up his book, smoothing it shut and setting it on the coffee table. "Right," he says. "Breakfast. Normal, stable, healthy activities. C'mon, kid."

"But it's—" Harry glances out at the sunset through the window, the rippling waves of orange and violet and blue. "It must be past suppertime by now, Sirius, I really don't need—"

"Call it what you want," Sirius says, flapping his hand, steering Harry toward the kitchen. "Breakfast, lunch, teatime, pudding. You need some meat on those bones. And I need more firewhisky."

-

Harry feels so instantly at home with Sirius, with this man who is his *cousin* but was once his *godfather,* who is somehow a complete stranger and family all at once that after a while he even starts to forget that to this Sirius, the other-Harry was an entirely different person with different wants and needs and a different personality. Harry leans into the kindness that his cousin bestows on him willingly, the soft ribbing and warm eyes and urging Harry to eat and sleep and rest like he's a sickly child. Harry shoves his problems with Tom and with Theo and his parents into the back of his mind and happily forgets them, at least for a time, and he lives in the fantasy he used to dream of constantly, the fantasy where he got to move in with Sirius after third year instead of returning to the Dursleys.

Harry thinks that maybe it could have gone something like this.

He knows that it would have been different of course, because *his* Sirius had been sad and gaunt and broken and his eyes had been haunted with regret and painful memories, and every time he had looked at Harry, it had seemed as though he was searching Harry's eyes for some

hint of James behind him. (Harry wanted to be that, for Sirius, he *wanted* to be James, but he couldn't, and he couldn't bear how it felt to let his godfather down, to remind him in some small or large way that he was what remained of James Potter, but was really not much like James at all.)

But *this* Sirius doesn't care about all of that.

He seems to not think of James much at all—except for when he's making disparaging comments, or talking about his own parents, or mentioning Harry's arranged marriage with Tom which he doesn't do very often because it makes Harry go pale and quiet.

No, for the most part the days following Sirius's arrival at Grimmauld Place feel like a sort of vacation. A family reunion, really, and it seems that Sirius is trying his hardest to be there for Harry where he wasn't before, to spend time with him and talk with him and cheer him up when he still has his days where he cannot get out of bed and he cannot eat or sleep and is paralyzed by memories of his previous life or of the way it had felt when Theo had pressed him to the ground and unbuttoned his trousers.

"Another one?" Sirius hums late one night, or rather—early one morning, when the stars in the night sky have just begun to fade and the cold blue of the morning is just beginning to seep across the horizon. Harry is standing in the doorway to the kitchen, trembling, his eyes huge and his arms wrapped around himself, clad in sweat-soaked pyjamas, his hair clinging uncomfortably to the back of his neck.

"Yeah," he says hoarsely, clearing his throat, and wavering. He shifts on his feet. "I'm sorry… Kreacher made me come down."

"C'mon then," Sirius says, nodding toward the empty seat beside him. He pushes a steaming mug of something across the table. Harry hesitates and then crosses into the kitchen, squinting underneath the harsh lighting until Sirius mutters a spell under his breath and the atmosphere darkens into something shadowy and soft and easy on the eyes. "Sit down, kid. You look exhausted."

Harry sinks down into the seat beside Sirius. He runs a shaking hand through his hair, pushing it out of his eyes, and then he rests his face in his hands. His entire body is aching and he wants nothing more than to go back to sleep, but he does not want to close his eyes and get sucked back into another nightmare.

"Want to talk about it?" Sirius asks quietly.

The kitchen smells faintly of tobacco. Sirius must have just had a cigarette and then vanished it when Harry came downstairs so that Kreacher wouldn't scold him for smoking indoors again. His hand is dangling over the side of the table, silver rings on his fingers glinting in the soft light, and his voice is hoarse, his eyes dark as they stare down into the glass of amber liquid in front of him. He looks just as tired as Harry feels. Harry wonders if the other-Harry and Sirius ever smoked together. He wonders if they ever sat together in the early hours of the morning, just like this, brows furrowed and thoughts muddled and drinks going cold.

"You don't have to do this," he grumbles, embarrassed, his face still in his hands.

“I was already up,” Sirius rasps. Harry hears the sound of the mug getting pushed further across the table until it’s right in front of him. “I’m on Romania time. Now— what’s your excuse? This is the fourth time this week.”

Harry shifts, scrubbing at his face, and then he looks down at the mug. He curls his hands around it. It smells rich like expensive chocolate, like cinnamon and almonds and cream, and he lifts the mug to his mouth, taking a small sip. It warms his mouth and goes down his throat like velvet, sinking to his stomach and spreading comfort through his whole body. Harry shivers and then slumps lower in his chair, his eyes drifting shut.

“Do you dream of them?” Sirius asks carefully after a while, when Harry has still not spoken. “Do you dream of James and Lily? Of what they did to you?”

Harry’s chest tightens. “Sometimes,” he says. He opens his eyes and stares down into the mug of hot cocoa instead of at Sirius.

“And the other times?”

Harry grimaces. His latest dream lingers like a smog at the edges of his mind, threateningly close but hazy, intangible, and the more he tries to recall what had driven him to wake with a start, shooting up out of his bed and clutch at his chest, the more it eludes his grasp. Harry thinks that by morning, he will hardly remember that he had a nightmare at all. Now, though, as he squints his eyes and presses his lips together and thinks hard, he remembers.

He had been in the graveyard again, tied up and restrained against Voldemort’s father’s tombstone, his leg in agony and his vision blurred. Voldemort had walked right up to him, smiled with those sharp, fang-like teeth, and had touched him. He had pressed one finger to Harry’s forehead, to the place where his lightning bolt scar had rested, and had smiled.

“Harry,” he had purred in that cold, sibilant tone. *“You enjoy my touch, do you not?”*

And Harry hadn’t been able to respond. He had been gagged, a dirty rag shoved in his mouth, and he wouldn’t have known what to say either way. He had only stared down at the man in exhausted terror. And then Voldemort’s face had flickered oddly, switching from the cold, inhuman, snake-like features and red eyes to the soft, warm face of Tom, of Harry’s husband, of his gentle eyes and shapely jaw and the soft press of his arms around Harry.

“My husband,” Tom had murmured, reaching up and cupping Harry’s bloody cheek with one palm. He had tugged the rag out of Harry’s mouth gently and had wiped the blood from his face. He had ignored Harry’s pleas and instead pressed their mouths together in a deep, aching kiss that tasted like iron and magic and flames. It had hurt. (It had made Harry’s toes curl.)

“Trust me,” Tom had said between kisses. *“Love me. Give yourself to me.”* And the death eaters around them had whooped and jeered, leering at Harry and shooting stinging hexes at his hands and feet, and Nagini had coiled up excitedly near his ankles, scales scraping over

his skin, her body rearing to strike, ready for him to fall dead at her feet so that she could sink her fangs into what remained.

Help me, please help me, Harry had hissed to her in a panic, struggling in his bonds, thinking faintly of a much smaller snake, one with kind eyes and scales heavy like silver. Nagini had only ignored him. And Tom had flickered again. Back to Voldemort, back to cold hands and gleaming red eyes and sharp teeth that cut at Harry's lips and still he hadn't stopped touching him. (And Harry hadn't wanted him to.)

-

"Harry," Sirius says.

Harry jolts. His hot cocoa slushes in the mug, some spilling over onto the table. He blinks up at the man in a hazy alarm.

Sirius's curious gaze softens at the panicked look on Harry's face. "Oh, don't worry about a little mess," he says with a hum. "Mum's not here to scold you for staining her precious oak table, is she?" He picks up his own glass and takes a long drink, his throat bobbing, and then he sets it down with a soft clink.

Harry scrubs nervously at the spill, anyway. He keeps his eyes fixed on the table and not on Sirius who he can feel is still looking at him. Harry knows what the man is going to say before he says it, because it is the same thing he has been saying since they woke up the morning after Harry's confession.

"They shouldn't get to go on about their lives," Sirius says quietly, carefully, " like everything's fine, like they aren't monsters. Like they didn't *hurt you."*

Harry doesn't respond. His shoulders tense.

"You wouldn't have to talk to them, or even see them," Sirius goes on. "We could go straight to the aurors. One look at your scars, and—"

"Scars?" Harry interrupts. He smiles wryly at Sirius. He thinks about the day he had gathered his strength enough to inspect himself in the bathroom mirror, to tug his shirt off and stare at the parts of himself where his father had drawn blood. There had not even been a trace of a mark. No shadow of a bruise and nothing to show for the way the dark magic had felt when it slashed through his skin and what lay beneath. His skin had been clean, smooth, and soft as a child's. (Yet another reminder that this body was not his.) "I told you… my mum healed me."

Sirius's brow furrows. He takes another long drink from his glass and runs a hand through his hair. Behind him, early sunrise light begins to glow through the window above the kitchen sink. "That's right," he says finally. "The diagnostic spell… it went back for almost a full

year, and showed nothing close to what you described to me. I've been wondering about that."

Harry looks up at Sirius in a sudden panic. "I'm not lying," he blurts out. "I'm not, it — it happened, I didn't—I promise, I'm not—"

"Hey, hey, hey," Sirius says, setting down his glass and holding his hands up, an alarmed look on his face. "I know, kid. I'm not accusing you of anything." He squares his jaw and his eyes darken. "I knew Aunt Lily was a skilled healer. Skilled at everything, really. I just didn't know she could heal enough to conceal even what might show on a diagnostic. That's—" Sirius hesitates. "It's not good. It's got to be illegal. Shady, at the very least. Not the behavior of a witch who has nothing to hide. And I'm guessing it's not the first time she's done something like that to you." Sirius raises a knowing eyebrow at Harry, and Harry flushes, darting his gaze down.

He thinks of the other-Harry's diary, and the pages he never finished reading. The ones riddled with dark ink splatters and words scribbled out. He wonders what other sorts of horrors the other version of himself had to endure before he was yanked from his body and deposited elsewhere. (Harry hopes, for the other-Harry's sake, that he ended up somewhere nice. Somewhere far from where Lily and James could ever hurt him again. Or maybe he took the train that Harry was supposed to take, and he got to move on, the way Harry had wanted to, and maybe he is with the *right* Lily and James now, the ones who had loved Harry unconditionally and never would have hurt him. Maybe he is at peace.)

Sirius is quiet for a moment. He twists the silvery ring on his index finger. "There were… other things on the diagnostic," he says carefully, like he knows he is about to set Harry off again. "Things we still haven't discussed. Things we *need* to discuss."

Harry frowns. He rolls his shoulders, and fidgets, lacing his hands in his lap. "It doesn't matter," he says evasively.

Sirius laughs, short and sharp. "Oh, it sure as shit matters, kid," he says.

"No, it doesn't—"

"It matters when it's more than the occasional paper cut or ankle sprain. It matters when my little cousin at some point had a bruised larynx so severe that it was nearly fucking *crushed."* Sirius waits a beat, and when Harry doesn't respond, he keeps pushing. "Do you know what happens when your larynx is crushed, Harry?"

Harry hesitates, and his cheeks flush. He fiddles with the handle of his mug. "Er… sorry, but… what's a larynx?"

Sirius rolls his eyes, and the corners of his mouth curl up despite the seriousness of their conversation. "The voice box," he clarifies. "Part of your neck."

Harry's eyes go wide. "Oh. *Oh,* that's… that's not…"

“I know what it means, Harry. I took wizarding anatomy. Someone choked you,” Sirius says, and Harry jerks back in his seat. The legs of his chair scrape across the floor, and his hot cocoa sloshes over the edge of the mug again. This time neither of them take notice. “Was it your dad?” Sirius presses, leaning forward, his eyes tracking over Harry’s face.

Harry shakes his head. “No,” he croaks, thinking of that day at the ministry, the way the floor had smelled when Theo pressed him into it, like dust and mildew, and how hard it had been to try and breathe with the heavy hand pressing down on the nape of his neck. His stomach turns.

“You had bruised wrists, defensive wounds, skinned knees, ligaments in your shoulders torn, strain to your magical core—”

“I know,” Harry blurts out desperately. His entire body feels tight, tense, and part of him wants to turn and run out of the room, but another part of him is *so tired* of running. “Stop, *please,* Sirius. You don’t need to read the list off to me, okay? It— I was there. It happened to *me.*”

Sirius’s sharp gaze softens, and something like grief passes over his face. He sinks back in his chair and picks up his glass once more, swirling the amber liquid around and around before finishing it off. “Look. I’m sorry, kid.” He runs one hand through his hair that is so similar to Harry’s. “I just hate that someone hurt you. I hate that they’re going to get away with it.”

Harry thinks of Theo again, of the boils all over his face and the spiders that had crawled out of his mouth. He feels that same sense of sick satisfaction that he had felt that day travelling over his skin like goosebumps. “It wasn’t like… that was different, Siri. Not like the stuff with— with my mum and dad. That day… Tom was there, and Hermione, and they helped me. I spoke with the aurors and I told them everything.”

Sirius’s face grows more and more horrified as Harry speaks. “Aurors?” he repeats. “Harry— who was it? What *happened?”*

Harry grimaces. “It doesn’t matter,” he says again. “He’s— he’s in hospital now, or at least he was, so he can’t— he can’t hurt me anymore and I’m healed. They healed me right away after they took the photos for evidence so… everything’s fine, and it’s all sorted.”

Sirius swears harshly under his breath. “Evidence? Hospital? Jesus bloody *Christ,* Harry—”

“It’s sorted,” Harry repeats stubbornly.

Sirius seems bewildered. He is fiddling with his wand now, rings glinting beneath the kitchen light, and his shoulders are tense. “It’s not sorted,” he says. “It’s the exact *opposite* of sorted. I mean— c’mon, Harry.”

Harry blinks hard. He presses his lips together. His eyes start to sting, and his cheeks flush, and he looks down at the table.

“Hey,” Sirius says instantly, the frustration melting away and his eyes softening. “Don’t do that, kid. You’re not in trouble. I just… I’m trying to understand.”

“Tom believed me, about Th— about what happened at the ministry,” Harry says slowly, fidgeting in his seat. “Because there was proof. Because I was visibly injured, and my trousers were torn, and—” Harry falters when he sees the look of murderous rage flit across Sirius’s face.

“Go on,” Sirius says evenly. He tries to smile at Harry, but it only draws Harry’s eyes to his mouth, to the sharp teeth in the grin spread wide and hungry.

It makes him think of Padfoot. He thinks of Professor Lupin, too, and he wonders. He has yet to see Sirius perform any kind of animagus transformation yet, but there have been little signs here and there, animalistic habits and expressions that make Harry antsy, excited to see his godfather turn into the familiar black wolf, but Sirius so far remains stubbornly in his human form. Harry doesn’t want to mention it until he’s sure.

“Harry,” Sirius says gently, and Harry blinks again.

“Nobody would believe me,” he starts, and Sirius shakes his head.

“Bullshit.”

“They won’t,” Harry insists. He lets go of the mug of hot cocoa and instead taps his fingers agitatedly on the wood table. “I’d have to talk about it with Tom and to the aurors and I don’t want to. They won’t believe me. They’ll say I’m doing it for attention, or I want my inheritance back, or I’ve gone off the deep end.”

Sirius seems inclined to disagree, but he doesn’t say anything, taking Harry’s stubbornness at face value. He purses his lips and flips his wand between his fingers. “Your memories then,” he says.

“No,” Harry says immediately, but Sirius plows on.

“It’s *perfect,* kid. You wouldn’t have to say a word to me about it, or to anyone. You wouldn’t even have to appear in front of the wizengamot if you didn’t want to. It certainly couldn’t hurt your case, and with Riddle vouching for you which he most definitely would if you would just *tell him—”*

“My case?” Harry repeats, his stomach twisting with discomfort again. He shakes his head. “I don’t know why you and Tom keep… I don’t *want* to. I don’t— I’m not submitting my memories. Not of my parents, and not of… anything else.”

Sirius’s look of tentative hope turns into one of frustration. “Please, kid,” he says, reaching across the table and taking Harry’s hand in his. “I hate seeing you like this. You’re suffering. Why shouldn’t *they* suffer? James, and Lily, and— and whoever else has hurt you?”

Harry swallows hard, tugging his hand out of Sirius’s grip and pushing back from the table, standing up. “I really don’t care what happens to them,” he says quietly, clenching his jaw. “As long as I never have to see them again. And I don’t want,” he hesitates, his breath catching, “it’s just not worth it to me. To let someone in my mind. That’s one of the few parts of myself that hasn’t been— that’s not— tainted.”

Sirius's face crumples. *"Harry.* You're not tainted."

Harry laughs bitterly.

"Things that are…" Sirius pauses, searching for the right words. "Things that are done to you, without your… consent, when people… hurt you, that's not on *you.* Don't you understand that?"

Harry's hands curl into fists at his sides. He wavers there in the kitchen, a few steps from the table, the window above the sink cracked open just an inch and the faucet leaking. The sky has grown brighter by the minute, and the soft sounds of crickets chirping and birds singing has drifted into the silence of the kitchen. They had talked about flying, the night before, but Harry wonders if Sirius will still want to, after this horrible conversation. He stares down at the floor, at his socked feet, and he takes in a shuddering breath.

"If it's not on *me,* then… why do I feel like this?" he forces out, his voice hoarse and cracking. "If it wasn't my fault, then why can't I just—" Harry trails off and shrugs helplessly, curling his arms around himself, and tries to swallow past the lump in his throat.

Sirius pushes up out of his own chair and rounds the table toward Harry with his arms outstretched. Harry allows Sirius to pull him into a comforting embrace. He presses his face to the man's chest and exhales heavily, shivering, his eyes squeezing shut. Sirius pets his hand over Harry's curls.

"Listen to me. You got hurt, that's all," Sirius says quietly. "You're not broken. You just need to rest and take care of yourself."

"But I can't sleep," Harry mumbles.

"I know."

"I'm tired, and—" Harry adds haltingly, almost afraid to admit it, "I miss Tom."

"Hmmm," Sirius says noncommittally, letting out a quiet huff of breath like he was going to make some kind of scathing comment. But he just runs his palm up and down Harry's back over his pyjama top and sighs. "He sent another letter today, you know."

"Yeah, I saw."

"You still don't want to see him?"

Harry half-shrugs.

"Not that I'm complaining, of course," Sirius goes on. "I certainly wouldn't blame you." He moves as he talks, looping one arm around Harry's waist and transitioning them into the sitting room.

Grimmauld Place must have at least twenty sitting rooms, each of them unique in their own way but Harry likes this one best, the one closest to the kitchen and filled with all of Sirius's souvenirs from his travels, like the record player he says he found in a flea market in Turkey

underneath an afghan woven with unicorn hair. Harry doesn't know how all of it works, the record player and the speakers and the box television, but he likes them all the same, and he likes to sit on the sofa and flip through the box of records while Sirius tinkers with his 'muggle toys,' reminding Harry very painfully of Arthur Weasley. This sitting room feels like it belongs solely to Sirius, not to the Black family or to the House or even to the other-Harry. There is nothing there to remind Harry of hard times or pain or fear. There is only his godfather, and soft blankets, and the warm scent of tobacco and firewhisky soaked so deeply into the sofa cushions that it's unlikely to ever wash out.

Sirius arranges Harry on the sofa and tucks a soft blanket over his lap before loping back across the room to the record player. He puts a track on, and the muggle box speakers crackle to life somehow, and soft music begins to hum.

"I forgot to remember to forget her

I can't seem to get her off my mind…"

Sirius hums along, watching the record spin around for a while before making his way back to Harry. He plops down beside him and heaves out a great sigh. Harry tucks his legs close, rests his chin on his knees, and stares at the coffee table and then at Sirius's bed slippers. He hopes they will just stay like this, comfortable and quiet, not talking about anything and just listening to the quiet croon of Elvis. And maybe Harry will fall asleep with his head on Sirius's shoulder and Sirius will carry him up to bed. But Sirius doesn't seem to be in the mood to let Harry off easy. There is a quiet tension in the air, not enough to cause discomfort but enough so that Harry knows Sirius is waiting for him to speak. So he sighs, and hugs his legs closer, and forces his mouth to open.

"It's not that I don't want to see him," he finally says. "It's just… it's complicated."

Sirius lets out a short bark of laughter. He throws his arm along the back of the couch behind Harry. "Isn't it always?"

"Not like this," Harry insists, his face already flushing.

"Ah, you kids and your young love. I remember when I was still at Hogwarts and—"

Harry jerks his head around and glares at Sirius beside him. "I'm not a kid anymore!" he blurts indignantly.

Sirius quirks an amused eyebrow. "No?"

"I am an adult, I must be at least eighteen by now, and you— well you're hardly much older than me, aren't you? And I…" Harry trails off and then feels his face go pale.

"Eighteen?" Sirius repeats, bemused.

"No, I—"

"That's way off the mark, unless I've gone mad. Are you pulling my leg?"

“No,” Harry says again, a little too quickly.

“You’re not drunk, are you? Did you swipe my firewhisky?”

“No, no. I meant, er—” Harry says in a panic. His hands twist together. He hasn’t made a slip like this since he spoke parseltongue in front of Tom that night. “I mean, I meant to say I *used* to be eighteen but now I’m older, and so I’m not… I’m not young anymore. That’s all I was trying to— I’m only— of course I’m—” Harry hesitates. His face goes even more pale when he realises that he *cannot remember* how old the other Harry was supposed to be.

Sirius is looking at him oddly. His brow furrows, and he cocks his head, and then he hums. “Ah, that’s right,” he says softly, almost to himself, and he seems to have just ignored most of Harry’s insane rambling. “I’ve missed your birthday, haven’t I?”

Harry opens his mouth soundlessly and then closes it.

“Shit. I’m sorry, kid,” Sirius says. He seems lost in thought now, guilty, his eyes glazed as if reviewing some far-off memory. “That was months ago and I… I didn’t even send an owl.”

Harry swallows hard. His heart is beating nearly out of his chest, the hairs on the back of his neck raised, and there is a metallic taste of panic in his mouth. He forces a slow breath in through his nose and then out through his mouth. “It’s— it’s alright,” he says haltingly.

“No, it’s bloody not. We’ll have to do something,” Sirius adds absentmindedly, reaching over to the coffee table and picking up his half-empty glass. He swirls the liquid idly and then takes a sip. “To celebrate.”

“To— what?” Harry stammers, his hands shaking, and he wraps them tightly around his knees. (He wills himself to calm down and act like a Normal Person who knows exactly when their birthday is and how old they are.)

“To celebrate,” Sirius repeats, looking at Harry again like he’s gone off the deep end. He raises one eyebrow. “It won’t be as lavish as you’re used to, I suppose, but we’ll have to make do.”

“To celebrate my…” Harry pauses. “My birthday?”

Sirius laughs loud this time, his shoulders shaking and his eyes crinkling. He reaches down and tousles Harry’s curls. Harry barely manages not to flinch. “You really are sleep deprived, aren’t you? You’re all out of sorts.” He laughs again.

“Right,” Harry says, laughing nervously along. “Right, yeah…”

“Eighteen,” Sirius chortles, shaking his head. “Jesus. And good thing you’re not, anymore, you know? You were an insufferable teenager.”

“Was I?” Harry repeats faintly. “Of course I was.”

-

They do end up throwing a birthday celebration a few days later, although Harry doesn't know if you can call it that when it's not *actually* anyone's birthday and when there are only five people in attendance.

There is Sirius, of course, who decks out the entirety of Grimmauld Place in all manner of tacky birthday decorations and balloons filled with helium. And Kreacher, although he attends sullenly and only because he 'already lives there anyway' and he wants to ensure Harry will actually eat the cake he baked. Then Ron arrives with Hermione in tow, her face nervous and her hands trembling until Harry hugs her and then she lets out a quiet, relieved sigh.

"Told you he'd be happy to see you," Ron says smugly.

"Shut up, Ronald," she hisses under her breath before smiling nervously at Harry. "Thank you so much for the invitation, Mr. Potter. It's such an honour to—"

"Harry, please," Harry interrupts, embarrassed. "And it's— I'm sorry for all the fuss. You didn't have to come, really. Did you two travel together? Are you going—have you been— I mean, er— I meant to say it's not actually my birthday, it's just that Sirius thought we should —"

"No hogging the birthday boy," Sirius shouts, cutting in to collect the presents Ron and Hermione have clutched in their hands. He sets them on the entryway table and then ushers them all over into the kitchen. "Come on, come on," he says, "no time to waste. We have a lot of catching up to do. Let's have cake, of course, and then perhaps a toast, and then we'll get proper sloshed, have some more cake, and then play a round of quidditch!" Sirius finishes his rant and then stares around the table with a huge grin on his face, his eyes glimmering with a hint of madness. (Ron and Hermione stare back at him in varying stages of amusement and horror.)

"Er, wait," Harry interjects. "We're not— we can't play quidditch drunk, Siri, are you mad? And I'm not supposed to drink, anyway, because, well…" Harry trails off. He feels faintly ill. He thinks about his first day in this world, when he woke up and Tom had thrust the daily prophet at him and he had watched an alternate version of himself stumbling around drunk in an alleyway.

"Mummy and daddy and his high lordship Sir Riddle aren't here to boss you around, are they?" Sirius hums, a dark undertone to his words. He tucks Harry more securely under his

arm, using the other to reach across the table and cut thick slices of cake. He thrusts one toward Harry and Harry, feeling rather bemused now, takes it.

“Er. No?” he says. He looks down at the slice of cake.

“I’ll keep an eye on you, kid,” Sirius adds. “You can have some fun. Alright? No one ever died from a bit of firewhisky.”

“I— okay, sure,” Harry says, flushing. “But I still don’t think we should drink and then like, go up in the *air—?”*

“I agree with Mr. Potter,” Hermione cuts in timidly.

“God. Who sucked all the fun out of my cousin?” Sirius chortles, squeezing Harry affectionately around the waist so he knows that he is joking. “Fine, fine. We’ll fly around on broomsticks first and *then* get utterly shitfaced. Happy?”

“Er… yeah?” Harry says. “I suppose?”

“Very happy,” Ron confirms with a broad grin and two thumbs up, his mouth full of cake.

-

Harry remembers his last birthday party, the one they had thrown at the Burrow when he turned seventeen.

Mrs. Weasley had made him a snitch cake and given him her brother’s old watch, and he had been so overwhelmed with emotion he had retreated to the bathroom until he could get ahold of himself.

He still remembers how the cake tasted. Smooth, and light, buttery and almost magical the way each bite had melted on his tongue. Harry had supposed the cake might actually *be* magical. Everything at the burrow was, even the teacups and the kettle and the dish rag and the terracotta flower pots in the yard. He remembers when they sang him happy birthday—all of them, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Bill and Fleur and Charlie and Ginny, and Ron and Hermione had wrapped their arms around him and hugged him tight. (Harry had been fairly certain that would be his last birthday.)

But—here he sits now, alive and well, in the backyard of Grimmauld Place that’s been magically extended to the length of a quidditch pitch. It’s nearing sunset. There is a faint

breeze, just enough to ruffle his curls, and the air smells like freshly-trimmed grass and peppermint and cigar smoke. Harry doesn't mind the chill because he is wearing the scarf that Hermione gifted him for his Not-Birthday, soft and silky and deep brown like Tom's eyes.

Harry finds it easier and easier to wear the skin of other-Harry— to *be* other-Harry, in every sense of the word.

Especially if it means he gets to see Sirius every day. If it means he can watch Ron make a fool of himself on a broomstick, flipping upside down, his hair flopping all over the place and his freckles standing out over his pale skin. His eyes are eagerly fixed on Hermione, who has refused entirely to even pick up a broomstick at all but is instead sitting beside Harry in the grass and scribbling away in a notebook. She is studiously ignoring Ron, although the corner of her mouth is turned up and her cheeks faintly pink.

Harry watches the exchange fondly. His heart aches, and a part of him longs for a different life, a bloody battle fought for Hogwarts and a first kiss over a pile of forgotten basilisk fangs.

His thighs are sore already, and his shoulders and his hips, and his hair windswept from how fast he and Sirius had chased each other around in the air on their brooms, racing for the snitch and performing more and more complicated twists and turns and performative tricks that had Hermione shouting with a shrill voice for them to come down and Ron shouting for them to go even higher.

The first time Harry and Sirius went flying, Harry worried that he wouldn't be able to do it, not in this strange body that is not his own. But it was just like riding a bike. He had held the broom in his hand and felt the rush of magic and had known it would be alright. And he had hopped on and shot off into the air and flown himself so high up he nearly crashed into the wards. He had laughed until his chest was aching, tears streaming down his cheeks, his hair windswept and tangled and his heart feeling lighter than it had felt in years. He had flown for hours and hours until his arms and legs went numb and even then, Sirius had to coax him to the ground with promises of hot cocoa and biscuits.

"Hey kid," Sirius says now, flopping onto the grass beside them, his eyes bright and mouth spread in an easy grin. "Tapping out already?"

Harry shrugs, smiling back at Sirius and leaning back to rest his weight on his elbows. "I am a bit tired," he admits.

A few feet from them Ron hurtles to the ground, barely stopping himself just in time to tumble from his broom and land in a heap of tangled limbs. "Ow," he complains, while Harry sniggers and Hermione tries very hard not to laugh or react at all.

"Too tired to party?" Sirius asks teasingly, and Ron hurriedly scrambles up, staring between Sirius and Harry entreatingly.

"C'mon, Harry," he says, eyes wide. "You're not too tired, are you?"

Harry wavers. “I dunno,” he says, some of his calm fading. He glances at Sirius and then looks down at the grass. “I’m not— I’ve never, I mean—” he stumbles over his words and feels his cheeks heat.

(What he wants to say is that he’s never been to a pub before, not really, unless you count the Three Broomsticks or the Leaky Cauldron which Harry thinks probably don’t count since he was still a student then and never had anything to drink. And sometimes he and Tom share a firewhisky, or a glass of wine over dinner, but even those instances make Harry nervous because he doesn’t know how he’s supposed to behave or how much he should drink or at what point the other-Harry would go too far and make a fool of himself and what if Harry does the same thing? He doesn’t want to wake up to a photo of himself in the Daily Prophet. He doesn’t want to disappoint Sirius, or wake up to accusatory shouts or cold silence or being treated like a child again.)

“I don’t want to embarrass you—” Harry finally tries to say, but is instantly cut off by loud, unintelligible complaints from Sirius, Ron, and Hermione respectively. “Alright, okay, I get it,” he chuckles, raising his hands up in surrender.

“Harry, of course you won’t embarrass us,” Hermione says earnestly, resting a hand on his shoulder.

“I’d be more surprised if you *didn’t* do anything embarrassing,” Sirius chuckles. “It’s your birthday party after all, kid. That’s sort of the whole point. And I told you I’d look after you, alright? We’ll go if you want, and we’ll have fun, and you can drink as much or as little as you’d like.”

“Well,” Harry says, looking between the three of them, twisting his hands together. “Alright, then.”

-

Harry stares at his face in the mirror of the pub bathroom. He presses his palm to one cheek, and leans in and inspects his eyes, clear and bright green and with perfect vision. He frowns at his forehead, prodding it with one finger, and marvelling at the smooth skin. The more this body becomes his own, the less Harry remembers from his old life. The thought is disconcerting. He swallows hard and looks down at his hands, soft and smooth and

unblemished. He thinks about all of those detentions with Umbridge and the words she had forced him to carve into the back of his hand.

He has no scars now, none at all, although he no longer sees that as a proof of other-Harry's easy life. He still remembers how deep his father's lashes had cut into his skin that night at Potter manor.

Amidst Harry's wandering thoughts, the door to the pub bathroom swings open behind him. But Harry is preoccupied, staring at his hands, and his thoughts are a bit sluggish thanks to the slew of firewhisky shots they had taken up at the bar shortly after they arrived. ("*Twenty-three shots for the birthday boy please,"* Sirius had said to the bartender with a straight face, and Hermione had shrieked and said *"No! Absolutely not, Mr. Black. It would kill him and then Mr. Riddle would kill you!"* and Sirius had pretended to vomit and had said *"don't call me Mr. Black ever again, or I'll be pressing charges."* And Ron and Harry had fallen over themselves giggling and had knocked over a pitcher of shimmering blue liquid that had briefly made everything in the pub appear as though it were underwater.)

Harry doesn't quite register the sound of footsteps until he looks up from his hands back to the dirty mirror and sees the familiar, blond wizard standing right behind him. He whirls around too quickly and has to grip the sink to stop himself from falling over. A dull ache starts in the base of his skull.

"Malfoy," he hisses.

Malfoy's smirk slips, just a bit, and two furious spots appear high on his cheeks. "Malfoy now, is it?" he says coldly. "Not on first name basis anymore with your dear cousin?"

Harry rolls his eyes. "What the hell are you doing here?" he snaps.

"I should be asking what you're doing here, *Potter."* Malfoy raises one eyebrow. "I thought you were forbidden from going out? And I can see you've been drinking, as well, which I know for certain your parents expressly forbid after the last time you humiliated yourself—"

"It's none of your fucking business, Malfoy."

"After everything I've done for you," Malfoy says, stepping closer. "Covering for you and Theo, paying for endless amounts of drugs—"

"Covering for me?" Harry scoffs. *"That's* what you call it?"

"Well, what would *you* call it?"

Harry stares at Malfoy in disbelief. "You left me with Nott that night at the party and we had the press swarming all over us *minutes* later," he says through gritted teeth. "How stupid do you think I am, exactly?"

Malfoy looks furious now. "Oh, don't ask me that," he says with a sneer. "You won't like my answer."

Harry rolls his eyes again and lets out a short, unamused laugh. “Right. Well to be honest, I don’t give a shit why you did it and I don’t give a shit about you or what you think of me. I’m done with Nott, and I’m done with whatever twisted, toxic thing is going on between the three of us. It’s over.”

Malfoy’s face hardens as Harry speaks, and then he plunges one hand into the pocket of his robes. Harry tenses, ready to pull out his own wand, but Malfoy instead pulls out a small manila envelope. “I didn’t come here for a family reunion, anyway,” he says coldly brandishing the envelope at Harry, who refuses to take it. “I came to deliver a message.”

“Not interested.”

“I think you might be interested in this.” Malfoy sets the envelope between them on the kitchen counter.

Harry does not even look at it. “Not likely,” he says, folding his arms over his chest and glaring at the blond boy.

“I wouldn’t have had to play owl,” Malfoy goes on, ignoring Harry, “if your warden would let me send a fucking letter. if he would let you out of your enclosure for some fresh air once and a while, if he would undo your collar and let you stretch your wings—”

“Shut up,” Harry snarls. His hands curl into fists. He takes a menacing step toward Malfoy, who appears startled and takes a small step back. “Don’t talk about Tom like that,” Harry adds. “He’s… he’s kind to me. He’s a good person.”

Malfoy laughs, high and sharp, and fixes Harry with a dubious expression. “Is that so?”

“Yes,” Harry snaps. “So stop coming around and trying to fuck up my life—”

“I don’t even have to try, do I?” Malfoy says coyly. “You seem to do that all by yourself.”

Harry lurches closer and grabs Malfoy around the front of his robes. He shoves him up against the wall of the bathroom.

Malfoy looks down at him and sneers. “You *actually* think Riddle’s a good person.”

“I *know* he is,” Harry scowls, and Malfoy smiles like the cat who got the cream.

“Well,” he says. “Hm. Then I wonder what your *perfect saint* of a husband will think when he learns the truth. When he finds out how much of a freak you really are.”

“I’m not a freak,” Harry says in reflex, although some of his confidence has already wavered. He glances over at the envelope and his stomach flips. His grip on Malfoy’s robes loosens.

“I know what you ask Theo to do for you between the sheets,” Malfoy says, his words slow and damning, a dark smirk on his face. “Things no self-respecting wizard would let another man do to him. But you’ve always been that way, haven’t you? Barely a wizard at all, really. Not a pure one anyway. Just a dirty little whore. Even when you were just a snot-nosed brat.”

Harry goes cold all over.

“What?” he says, his throat suddenly thick. His eyes dart toward the envelope again. “Malfoy, I don’t—”

“Oh, don’t play innocent now. He’s told me all about how you like to be a good boy for him, how you *beg* him to hurt you, how you like to pretend he’s your f—”

“Stop,” Harry says. He lets go of Malfoy entirely and takes several stumbling steps back, nearly slipping on the slick bathroom floor. “You— you’re lying. You’re sick in the head.”

“I think *you’re* the one that’s sick in the head,” Malfoy says, smiling wide now like the Cheshire cat. “But then, really… who wouldn’t be?”

“No,” Harry says, shaking his head. He steps back again and bumps into the wall. “No, you — you’re wrong—”

“Or,” Malfoy says thoughtfully, straightening his robes and pushing off the wall to advance toward Harry again, “Maybe Riddle really is your perfect match. Does he already know?”

Harry gapes at Malfoy in stunned silence.

“Have you told him what really gets you off? Merlin…” Malfoy pauses for dramatic effect— “don’t tell me he *likes* it?”

“No,” Harry forces out. “Shove off, Malfoy—”

“Does he let you call him *daddy?”*

Harry’s wand flies into his hand unprompted. The air goes sharp and heavy, electric with angry magic, and Malfoy finally falls silent. He takes a step back. And Harry, who is trembling, his mind coursing with panicked rage, levels his wand directly at his cousin. He tries very hard to not think about the implications of what Malfoy has just said.

(He can’t think about why other-Harry was the way he was. He cannot think about a little Harry growing up in this world just as unhappy as Harry was in his own. A Harry that—on paper at least—had everything he needed, a family and a home and food and clothing but was somehow *still* not safe, was still not looked after. One that probably only wanted to be loved. A Harry that did not have to fight Voldemort and did not have to grow up alone or orphaned or hungry but a Harry that, nonetheless, was alone just the same. Harry cannot think about that, *any of it,* or he will cease to be able to think at all.)

“You’re not better than me,” Malfoy says quietly into the silence of the pub bathroom but for the idle dripping of the sink between them. “It would do good for you to remember that. And you don’t deserve a happy ending. You’re still the same fucked up dirty freakish whore you’ve always been.”

“I’m n— I’m *not—”*

“Theo took pity on you. He still cares for you, you know, even after all the shit you’ve put him through. He offered you a way out, a perfectly fine life, and you thanked him with a lifetime of curse damage. You won’t find someone else to take care of you.”

“I don’t care,” Harry croaks.

“You should.”

“He deserved it. I didn’t ask for any of that. I don’t need to be taken care of. Not like *that.”* Harry’s voice breaks. He can still feel Nott’s hand around his throat, squeezing. He can still feel the press of their mouths together, and the way his knees had scraped over the floor as he had tried to crawl away. “I just want to be left *alone.”*

“I am trying to *help you,* cousin,” Malfoy says, slowly and emphatically, like Harry is a child. “What will you do when your dear, sweet, doting husband finally turns you out on the streets and Black goes back to Romania? You have no friends and no money. You have no marketable skills. You have no practical education. Your reputation is irreparably tarnished. To put it so even a mind as simple as yours can understand it— you’re used up, Potter. Expired. Rotten goods. Nobody wants a bloody thing to do with you.”

Harry keeps his wand leveled directly at Malfoy, ignoring the fact that he’s shaking almost hard enough to lose his grip. “It doesn’t matter. I can take care of myself.”

Malfoy snorts derisively. “‘Course you can. But you’ll have to run crying back to mummy and daddy eventually, won’t you? And I’d venture a guess that they won’t be so forgiving this time. Not for their stupid, crazy, whored-out, brain dead joke of an heir. You’ll be begging on hands and knees… lucky to be tossed a spare galleon every now and then.” His mouth curls into a cruel grin. “You’ll have to learn to be a good boy again.”

Harry flinches hard and bumps into the wall behind him again. “Stop fucking *saying that,”* he hisses. “Get the fuck *away from me.* Get out of my *life.”*

Malfoy throws his hands up in the air in a picture of innocence. “Like I said,” he hums blithely, “I just came to deliver a message.” He tilts his head to the side and smiles at Harry. “The letter is from Theo. Take it home and read it, why don’t you? And think carefully about what I said. He would still take you back now, I think, if you properly apologized. He’s worried about you. We both are.”

“Fuck you,” Harry retorts, his voice trembling with rage.

“No thanks, dear cousin,” Malfoy says smoothly, folding his arms over his chest. “I think you’ve been passed around quite enough. Nobody wants sloppy seconds. Well,” he hedges, “except for Riddle, I suppose. You *swear* he’s a good person, hm? And I suppose he *is* a mudblood. So… maybe he understands what it means to be dirty. Maybe he doesn’t mind that his husband will bend over and spread his legs for anyone who pats his head and calls him a good boy.”

“I’m not— I don’t—”

Malfoy laughs. “Oh, don’t be embarrassed. It’s all in good fun, isn’t it? We are family, after all.”

“We aren’t family,” Harry snaps.

Malfoy stops laughing, but his mouth twitches, and one eyebrow arches up high on his forehead. “No?” he titters. “Oh, I see. Now that cousin Black is back home you’ve no need for me, is that it?”

“Don’t talk about him,” Harry says through gritted teeth.

“Is Siri taking good care of ickle Harry?”

“I said *don’t—”*

“He doesn’t seem the type, you know. Mother always said he was low brow. Can he really handle all of your,” Malfoy pauses for a brief moment, “needs?”

Harry’s mind goes blank.

“Has he fucked you yet?” Malfoy adds, his mouth curling into a smug smirk and Harry flinches. His wand slips through his fingers and clatters to the floor. “That’s his jumper, isn’t it?” Malfoy says, nodding toward Harry’s chest.

Harry looks down. He had picked the jumper from Sirius’s closet just that afternoon after their quidditch match, shrugging it on without much thought beyond how he liked the colour and how it smelled nice, like aftershave and whiskey. *(“Quit stealing my jumpers, you incorrigible thief,”* Sirius had said teasingly when he had seen Harry in it, and Harry had flushed. *“I’m sorry,”* he had tried, but Sirius had only laughed, throwing his head back. *“I don’t mind,”* he had said. *“Keep it, kid.”)* Harry’s hands curl into fists and he glares at Malfoy, feeling more furious than he has ever felt before. “Fuck you,” he spits out, his stomach roiling. “You’re *disgusting.* Sirius has never— he would *never—”* he falters and his brow furrows.

He doesn’t *know,* is the thing. All he knows of this universe’s Sirius is what he has seen and experienced in the past week. Everything before that belongs to other-Harry, and—

Harry had made the same mistake with his parents, hadn’t he? He had thought they might love him. (He had held out hope, in fact, right up to the moment his father called him a whore.) Harry wonders if he’s made the same mistake this time, and has trusted that Sirius is a good person, that he loves Harry, and would never hurt him. He wonders if Sirius is only waiting for the right moment to show his true colours. And Harry has been sleeping in his *bed.* He has dressed himself in Sirius’s clothes. He has— Harry presses a hand to his mouth. With the other, he reaches out and steadies himself against the bathroom wall. He feels faint.

“Whatever helps you sleep at night,” Malfoy hums.

“Go. Away,” Harry says, his voice trembling. He swallows hard. “Get the *fuck* away from me.”

He thinks about how safe he had felt that first night, when Sirius came home from Albania and hadn't shouted or hurt Harry at all and instead had been kind to him and had spoken to him gently and had *listened.* He had believed Harry, even when there had been no reason to. He had been kinder to Harry than anyone else had been in that world, except perhaps Ron, who had been a paid employee at the time so Harry doesn't think that really counts.

Harry thinks about how many times he's crawled into Sirius's bed in the middle of the night, trembling, his eyes glassy with tears and pyjamas soaked with sweat, and how each time Sirius has yawned and tugged Harry close without complaint, layering him in fresh blankets and spelling golden lights to float along the ceiling, casting warm shadows across the room, until Harry has fallen back asleep. He has never hurt Harry. He has never touched him, not in *that* way. Not— he would never. Harry refuses to believe it. He refuses to even consider the possibility.

"You're lying," he says roughly, glaring at Malfoy. "You're making shit up. You're trying to get in my head."

Malfoy smiles. He crosses the room instead, sauntering, stepping back into Harry's space and prodding his chest with the tip of one finger. "The truth hurts, doesn't it?" he says softly. "But like I said— I'm only trying to help you, cousin."

Harry reacts instinctively. He shoves Malfoy away from him with all his strength and Malfoy stumbles backward, his arms pinwheeling, and he falls onto the damp floor of the bathroom on his arse. Harry advances on him. He crouches down and grabs Malfoy by the front of his cloak.

"You— you fucking freak," Malfoy splutters. "What's *wrong* with you? This floor is filthy, I'll have to replace all of my—"

"Shut up," Harry snarls, shaking Malfoy roughly and watching his perfectly-gelled hair come loose. "I don't care what you and Theo think you have on me. It doesn't matter. None of it matters. Just leave me and— leave me and Sirius alone."

"Or what?" Malfoy asks quietly, looking up at Harry with a tense, goading expression.

Harry falters. He tightens his grip on Malfoy's cloak. "I… I'll—"

"You know… it doesn't matter what you do," Malfoy says in that same quiet tone. The corner of his mouth twitches. He seems uncaring, now, that he is on the dirty floor of the pub bathroom and Harry has him by the collar of his robes. He is on a roll. "It won't change anything. It won't make you feel better. But you know that already, don't you?"

Harry's heart is pounding in his chest. A loud buzzing fills his ears. "It would make you feel worse, though," he finally says.

Malfoy's smug look fades. He begins to look faintly worried. "You wouldn't."

"Wouldn't I?" Harry says. He leans in closer. "I've done it once already."

Malfoy swallows, the line of his throat bobbing, and he wraps one hand around Harry's wrist. "Yes, but… I'm your cousin," he says in a thin, nervous tone.

"All in good fun, isn't it?" Harry sneers.

"Well. Well, of course I didn't mean it like—"

"You say Theo tells you things," Harry goes on, yanking Malfoy closer. "Is that right?"

Malfoy pales. He doesn't respond.

"Has he told you what I did to him that day?"

"H-he— he m-might have mentioned—"

"I didn't like the way he was talking to me," Harry says, "so I made spiders come out of his throat." He lets loose some of the angry magic coiled tight in his chest, letting it bleed out into the air around them, and Malfoy lets out a pathetic little whimper.

"H-Harry—"

"He couldn't breathe," Harry explains calmly. "He nearly choked to death. And I wanted him to. I stood there and watched. I *liked* it."

Malfoy starts to tremble. His mouth opens and closes soundlessly. His eyes dart around the bathroom like he is hoping someone will walk through the door and interrupt them. But they're alone, perfectly alone, just like Theo and Harry had been that day at the ministry.

"Do *you* want to know what it feels like?" Harry adds, almost conversationally.

"W-what it… f-feels like?"

"To choke to death."

"No," Malfoy says quickly, shaking his head, his eyes wide.

Harry grins sharply, baring his teeth. "Then don't come near me again," he hisses. "Don't look at me or speak to me or even fucking *think* about me. Get the fuck out of my life and stay *out."*

"Alright," Malfoy wheezes. "Alright, Merlin. Let go of me, you bastard."

Harry releases his grip on Malfoy's robes and shoves him back again. Malfoy is forced to catch his weight on his palms and he splutters furiously as Harry stands and looks down at him. The wind seems to have gone out of his sails, finally, and he looks far more disturbed than smugly gloating. His eyes rove over Harry and his lip curls.

"The Harry I know wouldn't treat family this way," he says with a sniff, his voice slightly shaking. "You've changed."

“No, I haven’t,” Harry says, looking down at him. “I’ve just spent far too much time with the wrong sort of people.”

“The wrong sort?” Malfoy sneers.

Harry takes a threatening step toward his cousin and Malfoy lets out a little yelp and scrambles to his feet, cowering away. His face contorts into something dark and ugly, and then in an instant it smooths over into nothing. He begins to carefully inch himself out of the room. “I’m going,” he says, and then points one finger to the envelope on the counter. “Last chance, Potter. Don’t come crying to me this time when your life falls apart. You’ll be on your own.”

Harry says nothing. He just watches as Malfoy finally turns away, pushing the bathroom door open and disappearing behind it. The door swings shut, creaking on its hinges, and then the room falls silent.

It takes a few more minutes for Harry to calm down. He stands there, glaring down at the yellow envelope with his own name written on top in elegant cursive. His hands clench into fists, and he wavers. He debates burning it to a crisp, or taking it straight to Tom or Sirius, or just opening it right there in the pub’s bathroom. Instead he picks it up and shoves it in his pocket. At the same time, the door to the bathroom swings back open, loud music filtering in from the pub. Harry whirls around, wand at the ready expecting to see Malfoy again, but he sees a flash of red hair and freckles and he instantly relaxes.

“There you are,” Ron says, his face lined with relief. He scans Harry from head to toe. “You alright, mate?”

Harry grips the edge of the sink and tries to stop his knees from shaking. He arranges his face into something casual, although he’s not sure he succeeds. “Fine,” he forces out. “Sorry, just… needed the loo.”

Ron doesn’t seem convinced. He crosses the bathroom over to Harry and throws his arm over his shoulders. It is a comforting weight. Harry leans into it, his shoulders sagging, and allows Ron to guide him out of the bathroom and back over to their table.

“Was that Malfoy I saw just then?” Ron asks, and Harry cringes.

“Er… yeah,” he says. He opens his mouth to say more, and then closes it. He shifts closer to Ron and scans the bar around them, but Malfoy seems to have left the premises entirely.

“Bloody tosser, that one is,” Ron mutters darkly. “He say anything to you?”

Harry feels the envelope in his pocket like a lead weight. His throat tightens. He clears it with difficulty. “No,” he says. “No, we didn’t… we didn’t talk much.”

“Right,” Ron says, his eyes scanning over Harry’s face again, always in auror mode although it’s his day off and he’s not even wearing his uniform. Something flashes in his eyes, a hint of worry, or suspicion, but in the end he just squeezes Harry’s shoulder and doesn’t push, instead ordering another round of beers for the table.

Harry's stomach hurts too much for him to keep drinking. He keeps one palm wrapped around the cold bottle, and he forces himself to smile and laugh and follow along with the conversation, which is easy enough because Sirius is shit faced and Hermione is adorably tipsy and Ron is so busy looking after the both of them that he can't pay too much attention to Harry's sudden shift in mood. All he can do is stay close, his arm brushing against Harry's every few moments, like he is making sure Harry is still there and hasn't wandered off. And it doesn't take long for Sirius to notice the shift in Harry's mood, either. His brow furrows and he straightens up in his seat, seeming to sober up immediately, and demands that they return to Grimmauld Place at once because it is *'far past his dear cousin's bedtime.'*

Harry doesn't know how to explain his behaviour to Sirius following his conversation with Malfoy in the bathroom. He sticks close to Ron and Hermione, staying glued to Ron's side and shrinking away from his godfather whenever he comes close. And the envelope feels like it's burning a hole in his pocket.

Harry knows that Malfoy was lying, he *knows* that, he refuses to accept the alternative, but he can't deny that encounter has left him shaken, and he no longer feels as effortlessly safe around his godfather as he had before. The one time Sirius touches Harry, laying a hand on his shoulder and squeezing, Harry flinches so hard that Sirius flinches too, lifting his hand off like he had just touched hot coals.

"Fuck, I'm sorry, kid," he says, seeming bewildered, and Harry tries for an unaffected shrug.

"It's fine," he forces out. His skin is crawling, his hands going numb and his ears are still ringing, and he can tell that Sirius doesn't believe him one bit.

"Is everything alright? You seem—"

"I'm just tired," Harry interrupts. He darts a glance over to Ron, who is helping Hermione put on her coat. "Can we just go h— can we go back to the house?"

Sirius looks at Harry curiously and purses his lips. "Alright," he says gently. "Of course, kid. It's getting late, anyway."

Harry nods gratefully, forcing a smile on his face, and tries to ignore the ache in his chest when they make it outside and Sirius very carefully wraps his hand around Harry's elbow, over his robes, projecting every movement, his grip tentative like he thinks Harry will shake him off. And then they are apparating, and they are back at Grimmauld Place, and Harry is helping Ron and Hermione set up to sleepover in the sitting room and fetching them blankets and pillows and hot cocoa and biscuits and doing everything he possibly can to avoid going to sleep in Sirius's bed again.

He doesn't feel good. He feels sick, his entire body trembling and his chest tight, and even curled up on the sofa next to Hermione and watching Sirius and Ron fiddle with the record player doesn't lift his spirits. Harry can't stop thinking about the things Malfoy had said. He tells himself that it's not true, that it can't be true, but that he never thought his parents would hurt him, either— and so the dark thoughts continue to fester.

When the after party peters out, Sirius lets out a huge yawn and then bids everyone goodnight. He walks past Harry on the sofa and lifts his hand just so, like he was going to tousle Harry's curls, but when Harry goes tense, Sirius backs off again. His brow furrows and he seems worried, but he doesn't question it this time, he just says—

"Alright, I'm off to bed kiddos," and Harry says—

"Okay, goodnight Sirius," and he fakes a smile again, his shoulders hunched, and Sirius seems even more concerned but he just turns to Ron and leans down, murmuring something in his ear, and Ron's eyes dart toward Harry and he nods firmly, and then Sirius disappears upstairs.

Harry hunches into himself. He avoids Ron's curious gaze for as long as he can, until Ron steps across the room and sits on the sofa beside him. "You alright, mate?" Ron asks quietly.

"Fine," Harry says.

Hermione hiccups. She leans her head on his shoulder. "Happy birthday, Mr. Potter," she mumbles, her eyelids fluttering.

Harry tries to smile. His throat feels tight, and his eyes are stinging. "Harry," he reminds her, but she has fallen asleep already and is letting out quiet little snores.

"I don't think she drinks much," Ron remarks, looking at Hermione fondly. Then his gaze drifts back to Harry and his eyes narrow. Harry prepares himself to be interrogated. "You want me to punch his lights out?" Ron offers.

Harry blinks. "Er—"

"Malfoy, I mean," Ron clarifies. "I'm an auror, you know, so I think I'd probably get away with it."

Harry lets out a startled laugh, nearly waking Hermione, who shifts sleepily beside him. "No," he says.

Ron purses his lips. "You sure?" he asks. "The git probably deserves it. He said something to you, didn't he?"

Harry wavers. He worries at his lower lip and finally shrugs. "No," he says again, unconvincingly.

"Did he hurt you? Did he—"

"I'm fine," Harry interrupts. "Nothing happened, alright? We barely spoke. Can we just—can you just leave off? Please?"

Ron stares frustratedly at Harry for a moment and then sighs. "Sure," he says. "Alright, Harry."

So they don't talk after that, about anything really. Ron starts a fire crackling low and warm in the furnace and he throws a blanket over Harry and Hermione and then he walks all around the main floor of Grimmauld Place, categorically checking every window and door to ensure it's locked. Harry watches him from the sofa, Hermione curled up next to him, and against all odds he feels himself growing sleepy. His eyes get heavy, and his blinks are longer and longer each time, and the pounding in his heart starts to settle.

Ron finishes his rounds and then turns out all of the lights, blowing out the candles Kreacher had set up on the table during dinner, and he fills a pitcher of water, carrying it back into the sitting room and stowing it on the coffee table in front of Harry's feet.

"For when Hermione wakes up with cotton mouth," he informs Harry with an amused grin.

Harry smiles back at him. "I thought you were off-duty," he teases.

Ron sinks back down on the other side of the sofa beside Harry, letting out a huff of breath. "I know," he says wryly. "Can't really shake the habit, though."

"Yeah," Harry agrees, leaning his head back against the couch cushion and closing his eyes. He listens to the slow rise and fall of Ron's breathing beside him and the soft crackling of the fire. And he allows himself to imagine, just for a few moments, that this is *his* Ron, the one from his old life, Harry's very first friend, the first boy he ever loved like a brother. He imagines that they're sitting in the Gryffindor common room, or lounging in Ron's room at the burrow, and they're just kids, and no one has ever hurt them, and Harry did not ever have a horcrux in his head or a lightning-shaped scar on his forehead. "So are you going to tell me what's going on with you and Hermione?" he asks.

"What?"

Harry grins.

"We—bloody hell, mate, there's nothing going—we're barely even *friends,* what do you mean—?" Ron splutters.

Harry can imagine how red Ron's face is, even without having to open his eyes. "Sure," he says with a yawn.

Ron goes silent for a drawn-out moment. "Did she… did she say something?" he finally ventures, sounding anxious.

"To me?" Harry says, still grinning. "What, about you? Self-absorbed much?"

"Harry," Ron complains. "Just tell me—"

"Nope. My lips are sealed," Harry says, miming zipping his mouth shut, and he chuckles when Ron makes an agonised sound beside him. "Look, just be normal about it, alright? Ask her to breakfast in the morning or something. I can tell you're freaking out."

"I am not freaking out," Ron whisper-shouts, and on Harry's other side Hermione shifts again, mumbling something under her breath that sounds like *'yes, the peppermint-scented*

quills please.'

"Relax," Harry says, trying not to laugh when he opens his eyes to see the panicked look on Ron's face. "Just forget I said anything."

"You're lucky it's your birthday," Ron hisses.

Harry rolls his eyes and yawns again, settling further into the couch underneath the blanket. His eyes drift shut. "It's not really my birthday, though," he mumbles. "S'not til… July."

"July?" Ron says, bemused. "I thought your birthday was in October?"

But Harry falls asleep before he can respond.

Chapter End Notes

TWs for this chapter:
references to past canonical torture (the graveyard), dubiously consensual kissing and touching (tomarrymort, taking place in a dream), references to past violence including choking and sexual assault (Harry/Theo), some self-blaming and consent issues, casual alcohol consumption, slut-shaming, implied daddy issues/daddy kink, implied possibility of childhood sexual abuse/incest (nothing 100% confirmed, nothing explicitly described but Harry has a conversation with Malfoy wherein Malfoy makes a series of concerning allusions about Harry and his father and Harry and Sirius. this leads to a lot of paranoia and panicking on Harry's part).

Thank you guys for always being so supportive. This was a big one, please be kind to me and to Harry or I'll cry lol 😭 Now I'm off to previous chapters to work on finally responding to all of your amazing comments ❤️❤️❤️

End Notes

tumblr
twitter

Works inspired by this one

all the things we can't unsee by gentianflowers

[Restricted Work] by daddytomriddle

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!